

Deborah Sokolove: Naming God

A Sermon for Seekers Church

18 July 1999

by Deborah Sokolove

Naming God

What is the Name of God? The Hebrew Scripture readings for this season are from Exodus, beginning last week with the birth of Moses and ending with God hiding him in a cleft of a rock and allowing only a glimpse of the Divine back. Next week, we will read that Moses encountered a burning bush, and was told, "I am the God of your ancestors." The following week, when we read that Moses asked God the question directly, the answer was something that might be translated "I am who I am" or "I will be what I will be." Now that's not exactly a name, although scholars have speculated about its origin and tried to figure out how it would have been pronounced. One suggestion was the nineteenth-century German formulation, Jehovah, which is still used in many hymns. In the Jewish tradition, the four Hebrew letters that spell this ambiguous phrase came to be regarded as so holy that when they were encountered in the text, pious Jews substituted the word "Adonai", which means "Lord." Over time, even that got to be too sacred a name for casual use, and except during prayer or formal Scripture reading, Jewish people would say something like "The Name" or "The Holy One" when they wished to refer to God. In deference to that tradition, and to the sensibilities of our Jewish neighbors, many Christian writers use the technical term "Tetragrammaton" to refer to that four-letter Unpronounceable Name.

Of course, all this did not stop the writers of the Bible or its translators from using a variety of names for God. The first name of God encountered in Scripture is Elohim, in the

story of creation. Scholars point out that this is a grammatically feminine, plural form for an old Canaanite god, and then some of them scurry around trying to explain why it doesn't mean what it seems to mean. Another name, which occurs fairly frequently, is El Shaddai, which means either "God of the Mountains" or "God with Breasts", take your pick. Somewhere, I read that there are seventy Biblical names for God, and that doesn't take into account the multitude of metaphors and descriptive phrases found in the Psalms and elsewhere.

The question of naming the divine continues into the present. Some of you might remember this bulletin cover of a few years ago, with its four columns, which by a process of permutation and combination could yield over [four million images of God](#). Some examples might be "Unpredictable, Invigorating Welder of Outcasts" or "Firm, Dancing Sparkplug of Patience." Well, some choices are better than others. While some of the combinations might strike us as a little silly, the profound truth embedded in this game is that whatever name we use for God, it is too small, so perhaps the more paradoxical the better. These lists of adjectives, nouns and prepositional phrases are not final, and Peter tells me he's up to over twenty million images by now.

One of the problems with these names, or descriptive phrases, for God is that our understanding of who God is is conditioned by our personal and cultural histories. Although theological formulations consistently claim that God is beyond anything that we can say or imagine, Christians are also burdened with a two thousand year old tradition of naming the triune God of Christianity as "Father, Son and Holy Spirit," and using the masculine pronoun for all three. For centuries, paintings and drawings have depicted the trinity as two men and a bird. In 1667, the Great Moscow Council of the Eastern churches declared "To represent the [Father] on icons with a gray beard, with his only Son on his lap, and a dove between them,

is exceedingly absurd and unseemly,"^[1] but that doesn't seem to have stopped artists from either the East or the West from perpetuating such depictions. Over a thousand years earlier, Augustine pointed out that the Father/Son/Holy Spirit formula was inadequate to describe the Trinity, writing, "It is not easy to find a term which appropriately defines such great excellence, unless it is better to say that this Trinity is one God from whom, through whom, and in whom all things exist."^[2]

But despite the learned disclaimers, most Christians continue to image God as male, at least at an unconscious level. At the women's retreat earlier this summer, in an effort to counter this pervasively masculine bias, we were asked to consider the use of the word "Goddess" as denoting the feminine face of the Divine. I had a hard time with this, because if I ever did image God as an old man in the sky, I left that image behind a long time ago. My own upbringing insisted on the transcendence of God, on a God who was ultimately un-namable, unknowable, indescribable, and beyond all human categories. My later journeying into Buddhist and Confucian spiritual models reinforced the reality that "The Way that can be Named is not the Way," that the ultimate reality is beyond description, beyond divisions, most certainly beyond gender. With this history undergirding my spiritual formation as a Christian, I was baptized and nurtured in this congregation, with its pervasive modeling of shared leadership and inclusive language. Thus, I do not feel a need to fight against internalized, patriarchal models of church and masculine images of God that are so pervasive in our culture, and often have trouble remembering that other people do. Instead of finding the Goddess empowering, I find her limiting, giving me only half a Deity, when for me God is more than male or female, or even both.

Until recently, I never thought very seriously about the feminist sensibility that helps make this church what it is.

It's not that I didn't agree with most of the goals of feminism, but rather that I took it for granted that someone was doing that work, while I was busy doing something else. One of the things I was doing, of course, was learning about what it means to be a Christian at all, and it seemed to confusing to study the feminist critique of the tradition when I didn't know the tradition in the first place. Somewhat by accident, however, this summer I have been taking a course in feminist liturgy, and have been immersed in feminist analysis. What I have found has caused me to reflect through a feminist lens on my own struggles towards full personhood, as well as what we are about at Seekers. Through one of those miraculous "coincidences" that seem to turn up regularly in a life attuned to looking for the Divine, the assignment for my summer course was to be involved in a group that creates liturgy, and to critique one or more of its liturgies from a feminist point of view. At the same time, Celebration Circle decided to it was finally time to revise our Communion liturgy, so I asked and received permission from both the professor and the mission group to document our process. I have been videotaping our conversations, and after the first celebration of the new liturgy, will create an edited video as the final project for the course.

To begin the process, I asked the members of Celebration Circle what they thought "feminist liturgy" is, and if it is possible for a feminist liturgy to include men. My own definition of "feminist" comes close to the slogan on a T-shirt that Rachel sometimes wears. It says, "Feminism is the radical notion that women are people." I like that definition because it does not exclude half the human race. By that definition, both women and men can be feminists, and by extension, a feminist liturgy must be one that includes the voices and experiences of both sexes, and that knows the Divine as much more than the resolutely masculine Father, Son and Holy Spirit. But there is a problem with this, because for many, the term "feminist liturgy" has come to mean a ritual

event for and about women as women. This naturally leaves men out, and the more we talked, the more I thought that perhaps Seekers liturgies are not feminist, but post-feminist, and that maybe we need a new term, like “inclusivist”.

In any case, in that first conversation in Celebration Circle, we talked about the way we name God in our liturgies. We talked about the problem of pronouns, of how we don’t want to say “he” all the time, but to constantly say “God, God, God, God” is, to say the least, somewhat unaesthetic, and how we’re always looking for new language, new ways to express what the congregation believes and prays. In the midst of this, someone said, “To me, the word “God” itself is always masculine. I can not get away from the fact that it’s masculine . . .” At the time, this did not register very strongly with me, but a couple of days later, I was reading a book called *In Her Own Rite*. In it, Marjorie Proctor-Smith distinguishes between what she calls non-sexist, inclusive, and emancipatory language. She writes

Non-sexist language seeks to avoid gender-specific terms. Inclusive language seeks to balance gender references. Emancipatory languages seeks to transform language use and to challenge stereotypical gender references.^[3]

When I read this, I realized that I had been arrogant in my own understandings, wanting to argue a point rather than see the reality of another person. Because for me, “God” is a gender-free term, I believed that anyone who thought differently was simply wrong and ignorant. I didn’t want to acknowledge that my freedom was meaningless if it caused pain to another person. I finally understood that even if I could get this one person to agree with me, there were countless others, both within Seekers and in the wider world, for whom the word “God” always takes the pronoun “he.”

And so the next week, we wrestled with the concepts that Proctor-Smith had laid out. Non-sexist language was easy to

understand. Most those words in the Four Million Images of God are non-sexist – neutral, ungendered: root and ocean and teacher and mystery and loom and lover have no intrinsic gender. The problem is that our very thought-patterns are gendered, and while we may have no trouble thinking of a mystery or a loom as an “it,” when we begin to think of teacher or lover or maker, the default position too often is male. That is, unless an occupation or activity or job-title is specifically or traditionally connected with women (like mother, or nurse), we virtually automatically envision a man, and it takes an effort to use feminine pronouns with them.

Inclusive language takes a different approach. Inclusive language adds “mother” to every “father” reference, “sister” to every “brother”, and “women” to every “men.” It says that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is also the God of Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah, that “the people” are not synonymous with “the men.” Inclusive language goes a long way towards healing the wounds caused by making half the human race invisible in worship. It allows us to pay attention to the women in scripture in a new way, and encourages us to remember that women and girls have always been part of the worshipping assembly. But our thinking about the dualism of gender is not symmetrical. It is not the case that “Queen” conjures up the same images of power and authority as does “King”; “mother” conjures up an entirely different constellation of thoughts and feelings than does “father.” And perhaps the greatest danger in such balanced, inclusive language is that we will reinforce the very gender stereotypes that diminish both women and men. That is, if mothers are always nurturing and fathers are always strong, if women are graceful and men swift, if God is imaged as a masculine warrior and a feminine housekeeper, then the liturgy encourages men and women to be locked into their culturally-prescribed roles rather than freeing them for new life in Christ.

Emancipatory language is much harder to define, and it may be different for different people. For some, to image the Holy as Goddess may be emancipatory, helping to free them from God as male. For others, it may enforce the God-as-male image, which they didn't previously hold, dichotomizing the Deity. One of the best examples of emancipatory language I can think of – although there are many others – is Brian Wren's hymn, "Bring Many Names," which we have just sung. In it, Wren breaks the stereotypes of mother and father, old and young, bringing new images and ideas that free us to imagine both God and ourselves differently. While there are other hymns that help us towards freedom, the task of finding emancipatory language is enormous. Gail Ramshaw, in her recent book *Under the Tree of Life: The Religion of a Feminist Christian*, writes

It will take, what, a century before the churches experience a healthy multiplicity of images for God? . . . The task of normalizing the proliferation of divine images is so monumentally massive that I should be content merely to help push this boulder up the side of the mountain.

But I hope for the century beyond that. I hope for the time when, beyond the male theologians lecturing on God as father and the women's groups praising God as mother, each sees God in the other, as the other. I hope for the time that God need not be like me – it's always handy to have God resemble me – but God is like the other, and I am drawn to that other as a necessary part of the I-who-Iare.

Yes, I hope for the time when divine images, already having confirmed the confident self, can affirm the distant other. I want my images of God to include the part of me that lives in Africa, the part of me that wrote the Nicene Creed, the part of me starving herself in a medieval convent . . . So I walk in the boundary between the medieval God and the postmodern God. You need sturdy shoes.^[4]

"You need sturdy shoes." I think about that as I consider the task that Celebration Circle has taken on. Our call is "to energize and structure the worship life of the Seekers Church. ... [We are] committed to maintaining a flexible but familiar framework for worship that offers a variety of opportunities for shared leadership." In order to do that, we must constantly walk in the boundary between tradition and innovation, between the familiar and the surprising. It is frequently rough and dangerous theological and spiritual ground, and I am grateful for the companions and mentors who have walked that way before.

In many ways, the decision to revise our Communion liturgy has been the most difficult work that we have done since I have been part of Celebration Circle. Because so much changes so often in our worship, this short service has been a point of stability, the words, if not exactly memorized, then so familiar that fragments rise in the mind unbidden at odd times throughout the week. Coming from a liturgical tradition which has a prescribed prayer for every activity, every moment of the day, I am aware of the comfort that tradition can give, the gift that memorized prayer formulas are in the times when I have no words of my own to pray. For at least ten years, the Communion liturgy has been a still point, a liturgical refuge, as well as a place of connection to the universal Body of Christ. But as with increasingly familiarity with liturgical history, and with changing Eucharistic understandings and practices in other church bodies, has come dissatisfaction with our minimalist Communion prayers, with the sense that Communion is a dispensable add-on to our regular liturgy.

For several months, Celebration Circle has talked about revising the Communion liturgy to make it more integral to the entire service, to make it a fuller expression of Seekers self-understanding as "an intentional body which sees Christ as our true life source," to give new life to words which have become stale through over-use. Some of us wanted to emphasize

the healing aspects of Eucharist, the sense that in Christ we are healed of our woundedness; others wanted to make even more clear than it already is that communion is real, physical stuff for our real, human bodies, rather than some kind of spiritual something or other, that's disconnected from our bodies. We've talked about adding movement and music in new ways, about restructuring some of the parts of our worship in order to make room for a fuller celebration of the Holy Meal.

In one memorable brainstorming session, we came up with nearly sixty images of Eucharist before anyone mentioned Jesus or the Last Supper. We mentioned ideas like familiarity/mystery; chewy; Old Testament; for us the leftovers are real nourishment; "for you"; calories; priesthood of all believers; celebration/grief; celebration/repentance; bagels; welcome; faces; circle; standing in a circle; nobody can eat the whole loaf – you have to break the bread to share it; touch; broken; remembrance; re-member; community; more than enough; abundance; ordinary/sacred; dessert; solid/liquid contrast; bike shorts and 3-piece suits; still place; crumbs; leftovers; cookies; unbroken circle; donuts; intimacy; confession; holy informality; recommitment; you are what you eat; yeast; healing; inclusion; passing it on; everyone as priest; chant; digestion; transformation; when the Spirit is among us; yeast; dead yeast; "I receive and then I give"; set apart and part of; lunch; breakfast; heaven; deepening; sinking; water/earth; standing/flowing; body/blood; accessing the soul.

Of course, there are probably as many other images and ideas as there are people to whom Communion is an important part of their worship life. Celebration Circle is committed to searching for emancipatory language for this new order of worship, to finding newly meaningful ways to proclaim the ancient truth of the Trinity as one God from whom, through whom, and in whom all things exist. Our intention is to have it ready by the first Sunday in August, but God doesn't always work according to our timetable. At its best, the celebration

of the Eucharist is a kairos moment, a time outside of time. In this kind of Communion, when we stand together at the heavenly banquet, we ordinary human beings know ourselves no longer as separate, individual, fragile, earthen vessels, but as grace-filled and gracious members of the universal Body of Christ, within and among whom flow the energizing, fiery, tender, unpredictable, persistent, hidden Holy Spirit of the loving, life-giving, creating, suffering, searching, forgiving, Living One.

[1] Leonid Ouspensky and Vladimir Lossky, *The Meaning of Icons*, trans. G. E. H. Palmer and E. Kadlowbovsky (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1982), 204, quoted in Gail Ramshaw, *God Beyond Gender: Feminist Christian God-Language* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 88.

[2] Augustine, "On Christian Doctrine," in *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2:524, quoted in Gail Ramshaw, op. cit., 87.

[3] Marjorie Proctor-Smith, *In Her Own Rite: Constructing Feminist Liturgical Tradition* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 63.

[4] Gail Ramshaw, *Under the Tree of Life: The Religion of a Feminist Christian* (New York: Continuum, 1998), 67-68.