



THE SIBYLS

Christian Spirituality Group for Transgendered People

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Newsletter No. 52 - Winter 2009

Christ triumphant ever reigning,
Saviour, Master, King!
Lord of heaven, our lives sustaining,
hear us as we sing:
Yours the glory and the crown,
the high renown, the eternal name

~ O ~

God must want Sibyls to happen and it survives by the skin of its teeth (a stupid expression; since when have teeth had skin?) If you are willing and able to receive your copy of the Newsletter by e-mail, please let both Rosie and me know (rosie@sibyls.co.uk and Susie@crewesue.com). It will greatly help with the cost of distribution.

Thank you very much to Susan Gilchrist, Mercia McMahon, Sandra Moore, Alison Raymond and Elaine Sommers for the items this time. Also to those who have sent donations so that our work can continue.

Please send me articles and other contributions; please also let me have up-to-date information about events.

Very many thanks to those who do write or send me items for publication. If you can send e-mail, MS word (please not docx files), most other word processors or even just typed (with a decent ribbon!), it is very much appreciated. News cuttings can often give a different slant on things and can usually be scanned.

Please don't worry if you have no technology; I can copy-type if necessary. **BUT... please bear in mind that I am Severely Visually Impaired so, if you must send me hand-written contributions, please make sure that I will be able to read them! If you have something handwritten and it runs to several pages, please think about (a) having a friend type it for you, or (b) telephoning me, and I will audio-type it straight into the newsletter.**

A few lines or enough to fill a few pages, I shall be grateful for anything you send.

Please send items to:

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97 Bedford Street
Crewe
Cheshire
CW2 6JB**

Tel: 01270-250207

E-mail: susie@crewesue.com

Views expressed in this newsletter are not necessarily those of the editor or Sibyls in general.

OUR MISSION

The Sibyls is a UK-based confidential Christian spirituality group for transgender people, and their supporters, offering companionship along the journey, and information/advocacy to churches. Sibyls pray, eat, and talk together, and seek to fulfil Christ's command to love one another.

PLEASE HOLD IN YOUR PRAYERS

Please pray for David in ongoing illness, Ruby in hospital, Rosie recovering from surgery, all those who cannot for whatever reason take the course of action their heart desires, and for all those known to us who are in need, and those with disabilities or who are in pain.

LISTENERS

People prepared to listen to others are worth their weight in gold. Jenny, Jane, Carol, Jenny-Anne and Helen are happy to listen to you. If you would like to join the list, please let me know. Do remember that they are not trained to give advice – but a problem shared in confidence often seems less of a burden. If you need someone to talk to, choose one and give them a ring: -

Jenny Bond 01623-836662

Jane Bowles 01492-660147

Carol Moore 01625-858487

Jenny-Anne Bishop 01745-337144

Helen Mather 0115-922-6450

Susie Withers 01270-250207

The listening system works. There are a number of Sibyls who use this service. If you want someone with whom to talk it over, why not give it a try?

DATES FOR YOUR DIARY

Regular Meetings

LONDON; usually the second Thursday of every second month at 5.30 - Service at St Anne's, Dean Street, Soho, followed by a meal together – next meetings February 11 and April 8.

MANCHESTER; Jenny-Anne and Elen organise events in the North-West and North Wales. There is a regular monthly meeting of TransForum (Manchester Trans Discussion & Support group), 3:30 pm Fourth Saturday, at the Metropolitan Community Church in Manchester MCCM) – **please see below**.

MCC is a friendly, welcoming, inclusive church. JennyAnne can be contacted on 01745-337144, mobile 07500-741955 or e-mail jennyannebuk@yahoo.co.uk

The TransForum group web page is www.mccmanchester.co.uk/trans.htm , there are also directions to the group venue on this website.

You are also most welcome to attend our Sunday communion service at 4:00 pm every Sunday at Metropolitan Community Church , Manchester(MCCM). see www.mccmanchester.co.uk

NOTE: Please do check the website, or with Jenny-Anne, as arrangements for MCC and the TransForum may change in the near future.

JAY'S GARDEN PARTY

January 9. Please ring to confirm attendance 020-8763-0146. This will be the usual meeting which hopefully you will enjoy. We start at about four o'clock with tea and cake, and there will be a communion service presided over by the Rev Martin Kelly. After that there will be the buffet with wine and good cheer. All Sibyls are welcome but for catering purposes please let me know that you are coming. 02087630146.

ROSIE'S MEETING - DORSET

Every four months between 12 Noon and 4 o'clock at Rosie's house. The next meetings are due to be held at noon on 20th February 2010, 12th June 2010 – all Saturdays. Please ring to confirm these dates and also to let her know that you plan to attend (necessary for catering). Please also ring for directions. **01425-270540**. No charge, thank you Rosie, but donations to Sibyls (if you wish) would be greatly appreciated.

WEEKENDS

2010 Friday 21 to Sunday 23 May – Windermere (Booking form attached)

2010 Friday 17 to Sunday 19 September - St Columba's, Woking

2011 Friday 15 to Sunday 17 May - Whaley Hall, Derbyshire

Help can usually be made available if you would like to go to a weekend but have financial constraints; please talk to Jay in confidence (0208-763-0146).

OTHER INCLUSIVE CHURCHES

City United Reform Church, Windsor Place, Cardiff, CF10 2BZ, 029 2022 5190. You'll find its website at [ww.cityurc.org.uk](http://www.cityurc.org.uk). Revd. Monica Mills has written to tell us that this church welcomes all to their Sunday service at 1030am.

Dorset Gardens Methodist Church, Dorset Gardens, BRIGHTON BN2 1RL 01273-605502 (www.dgmc.org.uk) . All are welcomed regardless of age, gender, race or sexual orientation.. Raymus Bowerbank has written enclosing a programme of events.

There are a number of other churches who welcome trans-people. The Metropolitan Community Church embraces diversity. I've been to East London, Manchester and Bournemouth and was welcomed like the prodigal. If you have access to the Internet, a church's mission statement should give you a clue. You could try calling the pastor to ask about their attitude. Let me know of others and I'll include details in the Newsletter.

LONDON EVENING MEETINGS

These are always good evenings to which all Sibyls are welcome with no need to book. These are gentle lovely meetings with a service which is always thoughtful, peaceful and healing, followed by a good meal in a peaceful restaurant with a nice atmosphere. Nourishment for mind, body and spirit. The Rector at StAnne's, the Rev'd David Gilmore, makes us very welcome and takes the service.

We still haven't decided on a restaurant and so we will wait at the church until about 6.15 and then go to the restaurant of our choice. That creates a problem if you are late. I will switch on my mobile 07719 726933 and you can ring and get directions.

Details: 5.30 service at St Anne's, 55 Dean Street, Soho W1 D 6AF, 40 yards up on the left from Shaftesbury Avenue (it doesn't look like a church but it says so and it is), and from about 6.15 a meal at a local restaurant. Next meetings - Thursday December 10, February 11 and April 8. Every two months, on the second Thursday - except when it isn't. No need to book - just come.

WEEKEND AT St. DEINIOL'S LIBRARY - NOVEMBER 2008

There were 13 of us and we all had a great time, despite the Welsh rain (it seems to be wetter than the English stuff). Helen Mather has promised us a report in due course.

~ O ~

HEARTLIGHT

Alison Raymond

This is a short reflection on the theme of faith triggered by having enjoyed the recent television series in which Prof. Richard Dawkins was exploring evolutionary biology. As a scientist, but with religious faith, I feel no conflict, although some would say I should. In this piece I am trying to express my position.

The Eagle never sees the wind which raises it to heaven,

The baker kneads the dough with yeast and marvels at the leaven,

The men of science gaze in awe upon the depths of space,

and somewhere deep inside my heart I sense a spark of faith.

A faith that says I'm loved by one who made all that I see,

That He who taught us how to live was tortured on a tree,

That humankind is destined to live with God one day,

and sometimes in the quiet, a small voice bids me "Pray."

My soul prays for my children and children everywhere,
I pray we get our daily bread, fresh water, cleaner air,
I ask God for forgiveness for the times when I've done wrong,
and on my knees I offer thanks and praise Him with a song.

~ O ~

SANDRA MOORE writes:

Jay's piece in the Summer 2009 Newsletter is both heartfelt and compassionate. She says that in her previous life as a male, she was "there but not there"; she was not really who she was, and that she lived in a shadow, as it were, being seen by others as who she was *not*, for the most part. I guess a lot of us could say AMEN. Now she lives in the light, as who she really is.

It sounds positively platonic, (for those who know that philosopher).

She is concerned for those transgendered folk who live their lives necessarily furtive and ill-lit; grasping at odd secret moments to be themselves and I suppose like moths flitting round street lamps, rather than butterflies in the sun.

Certainly it is possible to feel that the transgender life, when unable to be born properly in a person or community can easily come to seem very distorted; and also heavily exploited ; something verging on the lurid, and then self - apologetic, guilty, and increasingly lived in the illusions of cyberspace.

I absolutely agree with the main drift of her article and resist the notion that the t-girl or t-boy phenomenon is a suitable subject for consideration as something pathological.

Having had many opportunities in my life, sent me by (providence or karma or necessity) to study the relevant psychological phenomena at first hand (in oneself and in many others,) I would like to postulate a kind of result, which to me is absolutely certain and even obvious, which I think will support Jay's appeal.

It is this; it is clear that every biological man is also FEMALE and that every biological woman is also MALE.

That is to say all human beings have within them BOTH GENDERS, in their being; but it is also equally clear that only a certain number of human beings retain or become consciously aware of this fact; and cultivate it as it were.

And FACT it is.

The rest who do not cultivate this fact of their being or even fail to be aware of it, LOSE the awareness of their inborn wholeness as they "grow up", as it is unpleasantly called (It would be better described as "growing down". Growing down into the shadow world Jay describes where people live as half of themselves and where they are taught to acquiesce in this and to consider it a fine thing!!!)

These remainders, the ones who lose the sense of their whole self, do so for lots of reasons operating in the "shadow lands". These comprise: fear of others opinions, conformity with its pleasures and fears, advantages accruing in the shadow world, striving for external success, and the addictive craving to be

normal, (among others) and of course the repetitive promise -disappointment mechanism of sexual thought and stimulus.

But the predominant factor in all this is, is an all-pervasive authority exercised by the "popes of scientific doctrine" in the scientific establishment, who rule the massive empire of science in which everyone is exhorted to have faith. This science insistently exercises authority over us by countless means to make us accept the dogma that human beings come into existence through the meeting of a sperm and egg, and that everything in the human being is neither more nor less than a result of the ensuing biochemistry. The psychiatrists etc who have been trained in this same science smile indulgently or at worst lock up people who know for certain that humans are also soul and spirit, and who understand what Aristotle meant when he announced the body to be the outcome of spirit and soul SHAPING the body in their own image (the soul is the FORM of the body), or what St.John describes as the descent of the spirit as described in chapter 1 of his gospel.

Fundamentally, confronted by the shadow world of threats and inducements, most people give up, or frankly lose heart in the battle to be whole and accept the substitutes the world offers in return, security, money or just anonymous ordinariness.

They are content with life's consolation prize which also involves transferring the gender one has lost into the world outside one. One agrees to become only half a person and as a result craves the other half, not where it really is (inside one) but outside, in another, i.e. a "normal" man having lost in the process of "growing up", the woman in himself now seeks her outside himself where she isn't, instead of in himself, where she IS. Therefore he will find women attractive as reminding him of his lost or suppressed self, and women conversely.

Facts show that it is basically the same for homosexuals too but it sometimes causes annoyance if one pursues this line.

Is anyone aware of all this undoubted fact?

Yes of course but not especially in modern science. But, for instance, if one studies phenomena in literature or art or theatre one can often find it. Even in fairy stories one can find it. What for instance is the inner meaning of the "sleeping beauty," or of "Cinderella?" What does the "snow queen" mean if not the cold ruthless intellectual magic of our time which tears "brother and sister" apart? One can see even in pantomime how "spiritual" or whole characters are often "travestis". The sublime operas of Mozart give many examples as do the plays of Shakespeare.

So the truth is "Every man is also a woman, only the woman in him has not fully been born or condensed to the point of forming the body as much as has the man in him, and vice versa in a woman. In a man the man part is over-condensed to the extent that the woman is under-condensed. Or to put it another way, in a woman, the woman in her is drawn too far into death and the man is unborn, and this explains a huge amount of psychology of both genders.

It is a bit like the process of crystallising a fluid. In the process of solidifying, the form becomes distorted in one of two ways with all kinds of shadings in between. In a man the male part is lopsidedly fixed in form while the female part lives a kind of intense soul life on the verge of visibility, but unable to be born without a midwife! And the midwife must be the man himself, and inversely in a

woman. The invisible woman dominates the soul life of a man, and inversely in a woman.

Although science and psychology are groping for these truths, they are not (as yet) ready to distance themselves from the shadow-knowledge which ascribes to men and women a purely biological origin and they will not find them until they are ready to do this.

Why does ordinary science do this mact so limitingly on us all?

It does so, because unknown to itself modern biology is, as at present constituted, the continuation of ancient Judaism, which *deifies* the processes of sexual reproduction and heredity as JAHVE. The idea that reproduction is God, and creates a human being is made into holy writ which may not be contradicted. But what does this mean? It would be as if when someone walks through a doorway that we believed the door had CREATED him rather than that it was the way in to the room. Because I came through the doorway of my mother and father I am supposed to be *created* by them. Like a doorway creating what passes through it! In fact we are spirits, and pass into bodily life using a starting material supplied by our parents, but we are NOT THEM. Before that process we are spirits, and spirits are whole, (holy), neither male nor female but both or neither. One cannot define light in terms of shadows and male and female, as we know them, are SHADOWS.

(If you disagree with this and think you *are* a biological entity only, then you might as well not argue with me about it but with my PEN which served as doorway for these thoughts!)

In coming through the door of conception and birth, we tend to lose something. What we lose is our wholeness. We find the woman or man in us being prevented from accompanying us into the shadow world and the part that does enter fully being dragged into dead experiences and thoughts which operate there, rather like Orpheus losing Eurydice.

Most people seem to acquiesce fatalistically in this, and spend their lives unconsciously searching for the other half of themselves, but never clear what they are looking for, or in using various anaesthetics or substitutes, or just waiting for death.

But others, like Jay, refuse to do this, and will not forego their true "self-wholeness"; and even compassionately share their experience and consciousness with others. And so to such people we feel it necessary to say a very warm "thank you".

~ O ~

CONFERENCE ON SEXUALITY AND HUMAN FLOURISHING

The conference is organised through the LGBT Anglican Coalition. Four working groups have been set up by the coalition and the Sibyls is represented on each one.

The agenda for the education group is: a) to prepare a list of LGBT friendly churches across the UK; b) to test out a template for a conference day for use by parishes, communities, areas, dioceses in the discussion of faith and sexual and gender identity issues; c) to compile a list of recommended resources for reflection and discussion by individuals and groups wrestling with these issues.

Although the conference will cover LGBT issues as a whole, transgender interests will be appropriately represented. As this conference is intended to be run as a pilot for future events, we may anticipate that future conferences will run with a greater emphasis on specific interests. Therefore a good attendance is important. Can I strongly recommend the conference to you and encourage you to attend.

Susan Gilchrist

Sexuality and Human Flourishing

A Day Conference to explore and celebrate our relationship with God, with each other, and with our inner selves

Saturday February 6th 2010

10.00 am – 4.30 pm

Church of the Ascension, Stirchley, Birmingham

Keynote speakers:

Arnold Browne: The Scriptures and Sexual Diversity

Alison Webster: Sexual Diversity and the Human Journey

The aim of this conference is to create a safe and holy space in which we can explore the themes of human sexuality, faith, and relationships, through listening, reflection and discussion. What is it about our sexuality that informs and expresses the nature of our humanity and our relationship with God?

At a time when the Church is deeply divided on the issue, many of us find this question perplexing, in the light of our own experiences, and of those whom we know.

Arnold Browne, the former Dean of Trinity College Cambridge, has a special interest in the use and abuse of the Bible and in counselling psychology. He has contributed chapters to *Sex and the Christian Tradition* (ed. Jeremy Morris) and to *An Acceptable Sacrifice? Homosexuality and the Church* (eds. Duncan Dormer and Jeremy Morris)

Alison Webster is Social Responsibility Adviser for the Anglican Diocese of Oxford, and has a longstanding interest in identity issues, particularly gender, race, sexuality and disability. She is the author of *Wellbeing* (SCM 2002), and *You are mine* (SPCK 2009), an in-depth study of the formation of identity.

Cost £15 (Concessions £5)

Conference Joining Information and Booking Form from Daphne Cook, Centre
for the Study of Christianity and Sexuality, 01789 762 553
daphnecook@btinternet.com

This conference is organized by members of The Centre for the Study of
Christianity and Sexuality, Inclusive Church, Changing Attitude, LGCM, The
Sibyls, and Church members in Norwich and Birmingham.

All are welcome

~ O ~

TINA'S BOOK

"Unutterable Love – The Passionate Life and Preaching of F W Robertson" was
unveiled (we took the jacket off!) at St Deiniol's last month. I've included a flier and
order form with the newsletters that go out by post; those with Internet access can go to
Lutterworth.com and follow the links Catalogues/Religious Titles.

Ⓛ The Lutterworth Press Ⓛ

Unutterable Love

The Passionate Life and Preaching
of F.W. Robertson

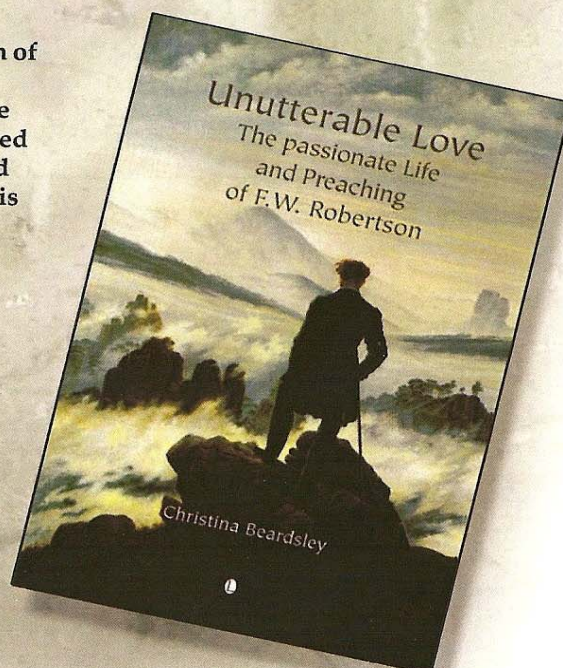
by Christina Beardsley

This biography is an account of the intellectual development of the early Victorian
Romantic preacher Frederick William Robertson, a devotee of Dante, Goethe, Byron,
Shelley, Coleridge, Wordsworth and Carlyle, and an admirer of German theology. His
receptiveness to the School of Schleiermacher, along with his natural ability of
popularizing the doctrines of liberal theology, contributed to the success of Robertson's
sermons and posthumously published writings. His work helped to validate the
reasonableness of Christian belief and the validity of spiritual experience and feelings
for his contemporaries.

**A captivating reconstruction of
puzzling episodes of
Robertson's life where the
author explores the gendered
aspects of his thought and
places new emphasis on his
Romantic sensibility**

The Author:

Christina Beardsley has worked
in pastoral ministry in the
Church of England for three
decades and is Head of Multi-
Faith Chaplaincy at the Chelsea
& Westminster Hospital,
London. She has a special interest
in the interplay between
theology and the arts, and has
extensively researched Victorian
religion and theology.



A Presentation at St Deiniols Library, November 2009

[1] "One night I was singing and praying trying to keep awake. When I tried to pray 'Our Father,' as was my custom, something within me balked. I felt a strong need to be nurtured as a mother nurtures her children. With fear and trembling I tried out the words, 'Our Mother.' Would I be struck dead? But instead of fear and guilt, I felt an overwhelming sense of peace and comfort. Something in me was released: an affirmation of myself and of God. I experienced a sense of being held, of being carried. Jann Aldredge-Clanton 2001:23

[2] "Lutheran liturgical tradition offers a model for contemporary worship reform, which I seek to follow in this book. The process is: (1) Examine the actual lived experience of the church. (2) Analyze how liturgical structures and speech forms the minds and ethics of the faithful. (3) Study the Bible and the Christian tradition to discover the most effective presentation of the gospel in the past. (4) Edit out what obscures the Spirit, what no longer, to use Martin Luther's phrase, "speaks the gospel." (5) Reinterpret what is salvageable so that it more clearly "shows forth Christ," to cite Luther again. (6) Make necessary adaptations and write new material in the vernacular, in order that the assembled community express not the status quo but the astounding mercy of God."

Gail Ramshaw 1995: viii

[3] "In Christian metaphor, *father*, is used almost exclusively to evoke patriarchal authority, rather than to suggest a sexual imagery of fathering.

Gail Ramshaw 1995:107

[4] "In answer to the question, 'How would you feel if God were called 'She' as well as 'He,' 'Mother' as well as 'Father,' Frances said, 'It would be nice if God were referred to as 'She' or 'Mother,' but since those terms do not elicit the same amount of respect, I doubt if the church will ever use them.'"

Jann Aldredge-Clanton 2001

[5] "To attach actions like ruling or nurturing to gender, however, is pastorally problematic. No wholeness accrues to human persons when one-sided exaggerations of behaviour are assigned to one sex over the other. We have as yet no clarity about which human behaviours are tied to hormones, and in the absence of clarity, only stereotypes and prejudice guide our imagery."

Gail Ramshaw 1995:125

[6] "Like most metaphors, naming God 'Father' creates meaning through the tension of the likeness and the unlikeness of the two terms of the metaphor. God is both like and unlike human fathers. But, through incessant use, the metaphorical quality of the name 'Father' has been lost. When the tension is lost, and God is seen as only like, and not unlike, fathers, the metaphor loses its power to evoke new perception through tension and wonder."

Rebecca Duck 1991:19

[7] "A different reaction to the limitations of masculine imagery for God is to give up gendered language altogether and seek for broader human terms which encompass both male and female without differentiation. God becomes Parent rather than Father or Mother, Lover or Partner rather than Husband, Child rather than Son. God the Trinity is named Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, rather than Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Such language can have its uses in pointing away from gender and sexuality as the locus for naming and knowing God; but that is its very weakness,, for it may convey a somewhat abstract, generalised knowledge of God which is far from the incarnational

focus of Christianity. ”
Nicola Slee 2003:32-33

[8] “What, then about the model of God as mother? Is not that stereotyping by suggesting as a major model for God *one* activity of females and the one most closely identified as stereotypically feminine, namely giving birth to and raising children? . . . although mothering is a female activity, it is not feminine; that is, to give birth to and to feed the young is simply what females do – some may do it in a so-called feminine fashion, and others may not. What is more important for our purposes is the symbolic material from the birthing and feeding process is very rich and for the most part has been neglected in establishment Christianity.”
Sallie McFague 1987:100

[9] “The meaning of mother imagery in the ancient world was determined by one of two archaic biological misunderstandings about human procreation. For the first: The earliest human records studied by anthropologists suggest that the male role in procreation was not yet understood. Consequently, the mother was revered as the sole source of life. . . . Now the second biological misunderstanding: Perhaps connected with the rise of pastoral herding, when humans could watch the results of the mating of animals, many communities came to judge the male as the supremely powerful procreative sex. Later called ‘the flower-pot theory,’ this biology saw the woman as merely an incubator for the tiny foetus inserted into her by the male. Some historians connect this new biology with the evolution of cultural patriarchy. Mother goddesses were demoted, to become consorts or mothers of the dominant father gods.”
Gail Ramshaw 2002:280

[10] “*El Shaddai*, traditionally translated Almighty God, meant something about peaks, perhaps God of the mountains, perhaps Goddess of the breasts, and was also a divine name with a pre-Israelite history.”
Gail Ramshaw 2002:299

[11] “On top of this dome you see a very beautiful figure standing. She is the great ornament of God and the broad stairway of all the other virtues that live in God, joined to God in sweet embrace. This figure represents the Wisdom of God, for through her all things are created and ruled by God.”
Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias*, quoted in Ramshaw 2002:427

[12] “Would a woman forget her nursing infant, or a mother the son of her womb? Even these will forget, but I will not forget you.”
Isaiah 49:15

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~ O ~

"It is hard for a woman to define her feelings in language which is chiefly made by men to express theirs." Thomas Hardy—*Far from the Madding Crowd*.

~ O ~

FEMININE IMAGES FOR GOD:

Susie

What Does The Bible Say?

by Dr. Margo G. Houts
Professor of Religion and Theology

I was twenty-two and just a year out of college when the issue of gender-inclusive language for God first grabbed my attention, via a bumper sticker, no less: "Trust in God--She will provide." I can still recall my immediate sense that God was being diminished, even insulted, and I dismissed it as a feminist ploy. All my life, I had faithfully attended worship, Sunday School and Bible studies. Not once had I knowingly seen or heard any feminine language for God. God had always been to me "Father," "King," "Jesus," "Lord," and "He." I had always just assumed that God, like Jesus, bore masculine gender. I saw no reason to deviate from the exclusively masculine language that I had inherited since childhood, language that felt comfortable and natural to me.

Then in seminary, I made a shocking discovery: the Bible itself uses feminine language for God. No longer could I simply dismiss it as a radical feminist invention. Why, I began to wonder, do inspired authors use it, why did I not know about this before, and what difference will knowing it make? For the first time, I began to ponder what it was about my social location that made feminine language for God strike me as a diminishment rather than an enrichment. More questions pressed me: Does God have gender(s)? How does religious language work--do gendered words attribute gender to God? These and other inquiries have led me to try to incorporate the Bible's own example of inclusivity in the way I think, talk to and speak about God.

Biblical inclusivity is increasingly finding its way into our churches. For example, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) incorporated the divine feminine into a 1990 confessional statement: "Like a mother who will not forsake her nursing child, like a father who runs to welcome the prodigal home, God is faithful still." (The Book of Confessions, 10.3) This affirmation is eminently true to the biblical witness, for relationally, God is like a mother in Isaiah 49:15 and like a father in Luke 15:11-32.

We who seek to follow the biblical example must first know what that example is. Some of the texts which started me rethinking the way I conceptualize God follow.

A: Female images for God (drawn from women's biological activity)

1. God as a Mother:

- a. a woman in labor (Isa. 42:14) whose forceful breath is an image of divine power . God is threatening to come against Israel in power, a power likened to the forceful air expelled from the lungs of a woman who is in the final throes of labor. Calvin misunderstood Isaiah's intent and construed this as an image of maternal tenderness!
- b. a mother suckling her children (Num. 11:12)
- c. a mother who does not forget the child she nurses (Isa. 49:14-15)
- d. a mother who comforts her children (Isa. 66:12-13)
- e. a mother who births and protects Israel (Isa. 46:3-4). In contrast to idol worshippers who carry their gods on cattle, God carries Israel in the womb. The message to the people is two-fold: it demonstrates God's superiority over other gods, and reiterates the divine promise to support and redeem. In short, God's maternal bond of compassion and maternal power to protect guarantee Israel's salvation.
- f. a mother who gave birth to the Israelites (Dt. 32:18) The biased translation of the Jerusalem Bible ("fathered you") obscures the feminine action of the verb, more accurately rendered "gave you birth":

JB: You forget the Rock who begot you, unmindful now of the God who fathered you.

NRSV: You were unmindful of the Rock that bore you; you forgot the God who gave you birth.

The Hebrew word in the first line can be translated as either "begot" (male activity) or "bore" (female activity); the context must provide the key. The word in the second line can only refer to female activity. Scholars have taken these two lines either as a male and a female image of God back-to-back, or they take both of them as female, due to the way this verse is located in the overall poetic structure of Deuteronomy 32.

- g. a mother who calls, teaches, holds, heals and feeds her young (Hosea 11:1-4) This poem is in the first person, where in Hebrew there is no distinction between male and female forms; the speaker can be either male or female. The series of activities are those that a mother would be likely to do: "it was I who taught Ephraim to walk, I took them up in my arms, but they did not know that I healed them. I was to them like those who lift infants [lit., suckling children] to their cheeks [OR: who ease the yoke on their jaws]; I bent down to them and fed them." (NRSV)

Given the context, it is possible that Hosea is indirectly presenting Yahweh as the mother over against the fertility goddess mother figure of the Canaanite religion that he is challenging. The images belong in pairs. Israel is presented as a wife in ch. 2 and as a son in ch. 11, that is, as female and male in tandem. It may be that Hosea is making the point that Yahweh alone is God by presenting Yahweh as the husband in ch. 2 and as the mother in ch. 11.

- 2. Other maternal references: Ps. 131:2; Job. 38:8, 29; Prov. 8:22-25; 1 Pet. 2:2-3, Acts 17:28.

B: Feminine images for God (drawn from women's cultural activity).

- 1. God as a seamstress making clothes for Israel to wear (Neh. 9:21).
- 2. God as a midwife attending a birth (Ps. 22:9-10a, 71:6; Isa. 66:9) (midwife was a role only for women in ancient Israel).

3. God as a woman working leaven into bread (Lk. 13:18-21). This feminine image is equivalent to the image of God as masculine in the preceding parable of the mustard seed.

4. God as a woman seeking a lost coin (Lk. 15:8-10). This feminine image is equivalent to the image of God as masculine in the preceding parable of the shepherd seeking a lost sheep. Both Luke 13 and 15 contain paired masculine and feminine images for God, drawn from activities of Galilean peasants.

C: Additional examples of the divine feminine.

1. Female bird imagery. Yahweh is described by an analogy to the action of a female bird protecting her young (Ps. 17:8, 36:7, 57:1, 91:1, 4; Isa. 31:5; Dt. 32:11-12).

a. The eagle: Dt. 32:11-12: "As an eagle stirreth up her nest, fluttereth over her young, spreadeth abroad her wings, taketh them, beareth them on her wings: so the Lord alone did lead Jacob" (KJV). The female eagle, both larger and stronger than the male, does the bulk of the incubation of the eggs as well as the hunting. She is the one who bears the eaglets on her wings when it is time for them to leave the nest. In a sudden movement, she swoops down to force them to fly alone, but always stays near enough to swoop back under them when they become too weary to fly on their own. It is a powerful image of God nurturing and supporting us when we are weak, yet always encouraging us to grow and mature. Cf. Ex. 19:4, "I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself," and Job 39:27-30.

b. The hen: Mt. 23:37 (par. Lk. 13:34; cf. Ruth 2:12): "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not." In his lament over Jerusalem, Jesus employs feminine imagery. Whereas the magnificent eagle is associated with light, sun, height, mobility and exteriority, the lowly hen is "associated with the shadows and darkness of the henhouse, and with depth and stillness and interiority beneath the mothering wings" (V. Mollenkott, *The Divine Feminine* [Crossroad, 1987], 93). Each image illuminates a different, important aspect of God's relation to us.

2. God as Mother Bear (Hosea 13:8), a fierce image associated with the profound attachment of the mother to her cubs. God's rage against those who withhold gratitude is that of a bear "robbed of her cubs."

3. Holy Spirit (in Hebrew, feminine; in Greek, neuter) is often associated with women's functions: the birthing process (Jn. 3:5; cf. Jn. 1:13, 1 Jn. 4:7b, 5:1, 4, 18), consoling, comforting, an eschatological groaning in travail of childbirth, emotional warmth, and inspiration. Some ancient church traditions refer to the Holy Spirit in feminine terms (the Syriac church used the feminine pronoun for the Holy Spirit until ca. 400 C.E.; a 14th c. fresco depicting the Trinity at a church near Munich, Germany images the Holy Spirit as feminine).

As we seek to follow biblical inclusivity, let us also affirm the consistent witness of the church, namely, that God is neither feminine nor masculine (gender), neither male nor female (sex). God, who is transcendent Spirit, possesses no physical body, yet accommodates to human limitations by using physical, relational, gender-laden images for self-disclosure. Some of those are feminine. Inasmuch as God inspired the biblical authors to be inclusive, who are we not to be?

~ O ~

A Priest's Retirement

A local priest was being honoured at his retirement dinner after 25 years in the parish.

A leading local politician and member of the congregation was chosen to make the presentation and to give a little speech at the dinner.

However, he was delayed getting to the event, so the priest decided to say his own few words while they waited.

"I got my first impression of the parish from the first confession I heard here. I thought I had been assigned to a terrible place. The very first person who entered my confessional told me he had stolen a television set and, when questioned by the police, was able to lie his way out of it. He had also stolen money from his parents, embezzled from his employer, had an affair with his best friend's wife, and taken illicit drugs. I was appalled.

"But as the days went on, I learned that my people were not all like that and I had, indeed, come to a fine parish full of good and loving people."

Just as the priest finished his talk, the politician arrived full of apologies for being late. He immediately began to make the presentation and said: "I'll never forget the first day our parish priest arrived. In fact, I had the honour of being the first person to go to him for confession."

Moral: Never, never, NEVER-EVER be late.

~ O ~

THE SIBYLS

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21-23 MAY 2010

Name

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Name of other occupant in room

Willing to share with

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Phone No.

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Please reserve for me the following number of places:-

Full weekend (Friday night to Sunday lunch) £125.00

Other (please specify):

*If you are not coming for the full weekend please telephone Elen
on the number above and you will be quoted a price.*

Cheque payable to “Miss J Walmsley – The Sibyls” enclosed ?

Any special dietary requirements?

Any other special needs?

Do you need help with transport to The Windermere Centre?

Can you offer a lift to someone?

Please send this form with your cheque to Elen Heart, address above