

Spirituality and Gender

John Nash

1998

Introduction

A major crisis in the world today concerns women and spirituality. Women everywhere are experiencing a rapid expansion in consciousness that has opened up new avenues to self-expression and fulfillment. From the limited fields of the home, teaching, and nursing, women now enjoy opportunities in virtually every field of endeavor: the professions, politics, the military, business, manufacturing and construction industries, entertainment, sports, and many other areas. Although they have met some resistance, the response from male colleagues to women's entry into these fields has been overwhelmingly positive. For the most part, men are readily sharing in women's consciousness-raising. Government and industry leaders stress the contribution that this previously untapped human resource can make to growth and prosperity. Today's women can do anything men can do, outside the realms of physical sex and religion.

Women have long been welcome in organized religion in service roles. Nuns could teach in schools and nurse the sick, female parishioners could arrange flowers on the altar, women could teach children and other women in Sunday school and could serve as volunteers in the great many jobs needed to keep a church operating. Now women are knocking on the seminary doors and demanding entry to the ministry. Some Christian denominations have admitted women to the ministry on an equal footing to men--in a few cases even to senior ranks such as bishop. Reform Judaism welcomes women to the rabbinate, and women have made some inroads into the priesthood of Hindu and Buddhist temples. However, other Christian denominations and Islam adamantly refuse even to discuss the issue of female ordination. After all, as the fundamentalists are quick to point out, it was through women that sin came into the world. Furthermore, the Savior/Prophet was male, so that's that.

For much longer, women have played a distinct spiritual role, although this role has received scant support from male-oriented society. The goddess culture of ancient times was destroyed by patriarchal invaders, notably the Hellenic Greeks. Priestesses and vestal virgins continued to play a significant role in religious life during the Greek and Roman periods, although large numbers are reported to have been raped or murdered. Others went to war, often fighting to the death or taking their own lives before they could be captured.¹

In the later Christian era, a few women, like Hildegard of Bingen and Theresa of Avilla were revered as mystics, but many more, including Joan of Arc, were burned at the stake. Historians attribute much of the appeal of medieval witchcraft to women's unfulfilled sacerdotal ambitions. Even today, Wicca attracts women who might in other circumstances be attracted to the priesthood available to their male counterparts.

Obstacles

Whether or not they aspire to leadership positions in their spiritual organizations, women face several obstacles in their spiritual quests. One is the gender-bias of the worlds' scripture and spiritual teaching. The Upanishads, the Bible, the Koran all describe the achievements of male heroes, and they are written in gender-exclusive language. Both types of bias are readily traced to the patriarchal societies in which the scriptures appeared. The Bible was written by men for male readers—readers who were not accustomed to equal opportunity and would not have understood such niceties as “he or she.” The authors of the scriptures have been accused of deliberately manipulating the story of Eve and the Fall for both political and chauvinistic reasons.²

Closer to our own time, the Tibetan's teachings were channeled by a woman but are written entirely in the idiom of the period, with male nouns and pronouns throughout. Nearly all traditional prayers, affirmations and invocations are written in gender-exclusive language. Again, for historical reasons they could not have been otherwise. Nevertheless, looking at all this material, many women have difficulty internalizing a message that seems to have been addressed to men and seems to imply that only men matter. Women ask: "Where are the female role models?" They seek, not so much heroines who beat Philistines or fought dragons, but role models for their approach to spirituality.

In a direct contrast to the exclusively masculine language of scriptures and prayers, esoteric literature frequently uses gender metaphors to describe the active-receptive polarity. The deliberate use of masculine and feminine terms in this context tends to undermine the argument that writers used "he" to mean "he or she" without intending to favor the male gender and ignore the female. But women cannot derive much satisfaction from this acknowledgement of their existence because of the value-judgments involved. The familiar litany of dualities: spirit/matter, life/form, higher/lower, active/passive, light/dark, positive/negative, always includes male/female. The often-quoted statement by H. B. Blavatsky: "matter is spirit in its *lowest* form" (my emphasis), hardly makes amends to women concerned about the unfavorable spirit-male, matter-female associations. "Feminine" and "negative" are used interchangeably, as distinguished from "masculine" and "positive." The same text may use "positive and negative" to mean "good and bad." An unfortunate association of ideas comes across, calling to mind the Eve-sin connection. Even when "positive" and "negative" are carefully interpreted as "active" and "receptive," the implication may still be offensive. Women, who still think of themselves as feminine, no longer want to be regarded necessarily as receptive rather than active. Most esoteric teaching is expressed in language that no longer coincides with modern people's view of themselves and their gender.

Another obstacle is women's very femaleness. Leaving aside puerile arguments about Eve's role in the Fall, the female physical form is held to have less spiritual potential than the male. Masonic and other occult groups—in a strange alliance with the Catholic Church—argue that women's gender polarity makes them unsuitable to perform key rituals of ceremonial magic, including the Mass. Women's etheric pathways are either not robust enough to sustain the energies involved or are unsuitable to channel the necessary energies. The church's prohibition against ordaining gays may also be based on concerns about ambiguous polarity in addition to moral considerations.

Opportunities

Similarly, we learn that all the masters in this world cycle have "to a man" incarnated and will continue to incarnate in male bodies. [Some authorities state that the Virgin Mary is an exception to this rule.] Why is this? Historically, it might have made sense in light of the responsibilities that the masters had to carry out in a man's world. But now we live in an equal-opportunity society in which women can be prime ministers, astronauts, or soldiers. Even the U.S. Army is no longer unequivocally opposed to women serving in combat. The only possible explanation--assuming that the teaching is true--is that the ritual magicians and Catholics are correct in their judgment that women's bodies are somehow inferior. Are they? We have a right to know the truth. Either the female body *is* inferior, and a soul incarnates as a woman in somewhat the same way that it might choose a retarded or crippled body to provide a special learning experience. Or the female body is not inferior, and humanity's authorities and teachers have been misleading us for 3,000 years. After all, it was not long ago that the old myth was laid to rest that women contributed nothing more to child-bearing than the provision of fertile soil for the development of the male "seed."

Many women are no doubt comfortable with the status quo. I once asked a black, female Methodist minister if she felt alienated from a church that provided no female role models. Her reply was that the gender issue did not bother her; she only felt alienated because it provided no black role models. But an increasing number of women are rebelling against what they view as 30 centuries of male-dominated spiritual teaching and religious expression. Writer after writer relates feelings of alienation. And they reject the explanations and excuses provided by the religious organizations and teachers.

We are all aware of the argument that “the masculine includes the feminine.” But, in today's politically correct cultural environment, this argument lacks whatever persuasive force it may once have had. No editor would permit a textbook to be published containing the gender-exclusive language of the world's spiritual literature. The United Methodist Church revised its hymn book to avoid, wherever possible, male pronouns. Many older Methodists--and even some young members--left the denomination rather than adapt to the revisions.

It is hard to avoid the conclusion that spirituality has a masculine perspective, perhaps with less relevance to women than to men. That men are the only worthwhile audience to be addressed on these lofty topics. That, whether or not we might wish it to be otherwise, women are second-class spiritual citizens, unsuited because of their bodies to participate in the most important forms of spiritual expression.

Meanwhile, women are asserting themselves by developing alternative metaphors to describe the sacred. Bookstores are brimming over with “women's studies” titles, including works on feminist theology. Emphasis in these studies is placed on nature and its cycles, on sharing and connectedness; in contrast, linear evolution is treated as a masculine concept and deemphasized.³ Inspiration for many of these metaphors comes from goddess-worship that existed throughout most of the known world until about 3,000 years ago. The Goddess—nurturing and inclusive—has been resurrected to provide a metaphor for meaningful aspects of divine expression.⁴

Reinforcement comes from other traditions. One is the Old Religion that persisted in Europe--largely with female support--well into Christian times and still exists today in Wicca and similar groups. Others are the Jewish notion of the Shekhinah and the Eastern Orthodox personification of Wisdom as the female Sophia. Recently, Sophia has reemerged in feminist spiritual circles as a focus for rituals, hymns, and prayers.⁵

Interestingly, a promising source of inspiration for women's spirituality that seems to have been overlooked is the Virgin Mary. The Council of Ephesus (431 AD) pronounced that Mary was *Theotokos*, the Mother of God. The concept of a mother of the god, or of all the gods, has an echo in several ancient religions. Indeed, it has been suggested that the rapid growth of the Marian cult in Ireland was due in large measure to the country's tradition of Celtic goddesses. Mary simply took the place of the female divinities that the people had traditionally venerated.⁶ Interestingly, Ephesus was a center of the cult of Dianna, and legend has it that a crowd gathered outside the council building, chanting “give us back our goddess.” Apparently, the Church Fathers consented. In any event, the Virgin Mary has provided a rich culture of traditional religious expression not found in Protestant denominations. Possibly she does not appeal to the feminists because of her too-close associations with the patriarchal church.

An obvious response to the quest for a distinctively feminine spirituality would be to dismiss it as an aberration of the women's liberation movement—as a few more ruffled feathers among feminist extremists. The quest for the “feminine face of God” is nothing but an emotional outburst, tinged with obvious glamour. As soon as women feel more secure in the mainstream of society, and as the feminist message becomes less strident, women—and male “fellow travelers”—will relax and adjust to the reality that God is above gender. The pronouns are masculine just because of accepted usage. Conservative religious denominations are simply slow to recognize women's aspirations and competence to occupy leadership positions. Gender is nothing more than a physical bifurcation intended to propagate the species. Attempts to introduce gender into spirituality are simply a projection of sexual dysfunction on emotionally-based religious instincts. The masters' decision to inhabit only male bodies is not intended to put women down. In any case, all souls will have incarnated as men by the time they attain the fifth initiation, so the problem will go away.

Such a response, I believe, is not only insensitive but inadequate. It only reinforces suspicions that spiritual teachings have, in significant measure, become crystallized and outdated. Too many women, as well as many men, sense a fundamental problem. Clearly, the women's spiritual movement is still in its infancy and has drawn upon simplistic metaphors. But it has developed rapidly, without help from professional theologians or esoteric philosophers. And, after all, what other metaphors were available? The fact that this is a grass-roots movement should not be an excuse to discredit it. To do so might suggest glamour on our

part. The ideas will no doubt mature as time passes and as they are refined by scholarly inquiry. Rather, we must thoughtfully and humbly ask whether our spiritual teachings need redefinition or reexpression; whether our understanding is ready for a new turn, a new expansion, a new unfolding.

We should be open to new insights and should help others explore their gender-related insights. All of us involved in teaching or counseling should be sensitive to women's reactions to gender-exclusive language and try to avoid it. We should present spiritual material in a way that acknowledges both female and male metaphors and symbols, but we should be careful to preserve the sense that—although distinct and contrasting—they are equally important. We should be extremely careful to avoid the “feminine-negative-lower-bad” association. Finally, we must be prepared to listen and learn.

Gender and Spirituality

Two important questions emerge from the women's spirituality movement. The first is whether a distinctive feminine dimension of spirituality really exists. When we examine the ideas in women's spiritual writings, we see many concepts that are easily reconcilable with traditional religious and esoteric teachings. For example, the notion of cyclical reality is well established, although it is regarded as incomplete. Rather, cycles are superimposed on linear evolution, as symbolized by a spiral. Connectedness and nurturing are well-established characteristics of the 2nd Aspect of Deity, contrasting with the 1st-Aspect characteristics of individual assertiveness and destruction of outmoded forms. All that is needed is to reexpress the traditional concepts in a manner that provides the mental “role models” that women are calling for. To illustrate, while we have avoided calling compassion a female quality for fear of turning men off, doing so might turn a large number of women on. In any event, men need to overcome the chauvinistic perception that anything feminine is demeaning.

In a real sense, the Historic Christ set the stage for women's spiritual awakening by preaching “female” qualities of love, compassion, healing, gentleness, tolerance, and humility; and he showed that living these qualities demonstrated, not weakness, but strength. His life and teaching contrasted with those of Indra, Krishna, and Moses, for example, all of whom exhibited aggressive, masculine characteristics. The feminists overlook the “femaleness” of the Christ's teaching in their anger that he incarnated as a man. For its part, the patriarchal church rejoiced in his male embodiment but misunderstood his teaching.

The idea that certain divine characteristics can be considered female, while others seem male, deserves further study and reflection. It leads to the other major question posed by the women's spirituality movement: whether gender extends beyond the dense physical plane. Here, “gender” must obviously be distinguished from sexual activity and physical procreation. Biological factors clearly affect women's emotions and, to some degree, their mental life. But scientific evidence points to gender differences at emotional and mental levels that cannot be attributed solely to biological or cultural causes. For instance, several studies have measured gender effects on learning, all the way from grade school through college. Gender evidently extends throughout the personality. Whether it extends to higher levels, except as a mnemonic for polarity, is not known. Or perhaps the concept of polarity needs to be amplified. The possibility that souls or monads might exhibit gender characteristics is usually dismissed out of hand, but it has never been explored except in an obviously naive form in the notion of soul-mates. At a higher level still, some spiritual groups speak of God the Mother, or Father-Mother God. These various examples do not add up to a coherent picture; but they may provide the seeds for further study. If gender exists on higher levels, it may present a pair of opposites that is to be reconciled in a new harmony.

We in the Arcane School are prone to accept or reject hypotheses according to their treatment—or nontreatment—in the Tibetan's books. The Tibetan discusses sex in several contexts ranging from sexual pathology through sexual relationships and desire to a possible higher symbolism. For example, in *Esoteric Psychology II*, he disdains the “spiritualized sex life” of both male and female mystics that can arise from misplaced energies from the sacral or solar plexus centers. In *Esoteric Psychology I*, he discusses changes in the use of the physical sexual function that can be expected as we enter the New Age. In *Treatise on Cosmic Fire*, the Tibetan uses sexual analogs to describe desire at levels up to and including the Logoc plane. The

Law of Attraction, he says, “deals with the ability of the Logos to ‘love wisely’, in the occult sense of the term.” Later in the same text, he touches, with little amplification, on a succession of states which apply to “all the Existences manifesting on any plane, systemic and cosmic”:

- Mutual attraction,
- Complementary suitability,
- Instinctual appeal,
- Approach, and recognized cooperation,
- Union,
- The next stage is the temporary importance of the material aspect, that of the Mother, the feminine aspect,
- The withdrawal into a temporary retirement of the Father,
- The work of creating the Son,
- The evolution and growth of the Son, both materially and in consciousness,
- Emancipation of the Son from his Mother, or the liberation of the soul at maturity from matter,
- Recognition by the Son of the Father and his return to that Father.⁷

The terms are traditional, with “Father/Mother” corresponding to “spirit/matter,” or “positive/negative;” “Son” is clearly male and destined to take precedence over “Mother.” Nevertheless, the Tibetan’s intention is clearly to raise the subject of gender to a new height: “The present ideas annent Sex must be transformed and raised from the existing lower connotation to its true significance.”⁸ The women’s spirituality movement and the general climate of thought in advanced humanity has done much to accomplish that goal. Meanwhile, the Tibetan’s hints about higher-level gender represent tantalizing beginnings that could be expanded into a whole new dimension of understanding.

The Tibetan ended his series of teachings in 1949, promising that his next series would begin early in the 21st century. This promise evidently was based on the premise that humanity needed time to assimilate his teachings and for at least its more advanced members to expand their level of consciousness in readiness for new material. The masters all point out that they cannot predict the pace of human progress. In several instances where dates were given, the Tibetan overestimated its pace; in other areas, he may have underestimated it. Undoubtedly, if his teachings were dictated today—whether through a man or woman—the language would reflect contemporary concern for political correctness. Certainly, we should not read into tan’s teachings the masculine language more than is justified by the social context in which they were written. I certainly do not believe the Tibetan would approve of a trend toward any kind of scriptural inerrancy in connection with his books. But if they were written today the Tibetan’s teachings might reflect more fundamental differences in its coverage of gender. They could hardly ignore twenty years of feminist theology any more than they could ignore currents of thought in the early 20th-century Theosophical Society.

Revelation is given out a little at a time, when people are capable of accepting new perspectives and new ideas. Detailed revelation on the seven rays was made available only during the last 120 years. Women’s consciousness—and both men’s and women’s consciousness on the subject of gender—have developed rapidly. Humanity now seems ready for further revelation concerning gender. We can start to explore the issue and possibly participate in this revelation.

As the 20th century comes to a close, we look forward not only to new revelation but to the reappearance of the Christ. Mother Ann Lee (d. 1787), influential teacher in the Millennium Church—the Shakers—predicted that the Christ would appear as a woman at the Second Coming. Perhaps the Christ will reappear as a black woman, if only to provide a role model for the world’s women as well as for its nonwhite races. Undoubtedly, if there are disciples next time, they will include both men and women. There is some

evidence that Mary Magdalene and other women served as disciples but that their role was ignored by the patriarchal authors of the New Testament. Gender equality among the Essenes, with whom Jesus and the disciples may have been associated, supports this contention. The apocryphal gospels, that also have Essenic associations, give women a larger role than do the canonical gospels.

We do not have answers to the various questions raised in this essay. In fact, the questions themselves may need to be rephrased. But we cannot afford to ignore the issues because they may be ill defined. Many women and men face a crisis in their development, wrestling with what they perceive as a gap in spiritual teachings. However, as we are fond of saying, a crisis is an opportunity, and the present tension of ideas seems certain to produce new understanding, new insights. Let us rejoice in this opportunity and go forward to meet the challenge.

¹ See, for example, Norma L. Goodrick. *Priestesses*. New York: Harper-Collins, 1990.

² Elaine Pagels. *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent*. New York: Vintage Books, 1989.

³ Sherry R. Anderson and Patricia Hopkins. *The Feminine Face of God*. New York: Bantam Books, 1991.

⁴ See, for example, Monica Sjo and Barbara Mor, *The Great Cosmic Mother*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1975.

⁵ Susan Cady, Marian Ronan, and Hal Taussig. *Wisdom Feast*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989.

⁶ Peter B. Ellis. *Celtic Women*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995.

⁷ Alice Bailey. *Treatise on Cosmic Fire*. New York: Lucis, page 874-5.

⁸ *Ibid.*