

UNMASKING GOD: WONDER WOMAN OR HOUSEWIFE?

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Prometheus knowingly and unabashedly stole fire from God and gave it to humans. By doing so, he not only defied Zeus but unmasked him. We might say Prometheus “stole his thunder.” Power once contained in the heavens was now distributed throughout the earth. That igniting quality of fire—for both good and ill—was no longer the coveted possession of the pantheon alone. Its power was unleashed where it was needed most.

Unmasking God, the role of Prometheus in ancient Greek legend, is the inheritance of the Christian feminist today. Whatever advancements we make in our personal journeys or corporate structures, success depends in part on our persistence and skill in peeling away from God’s face the layers of oppressive ideology. That’s been the impetus behind the attacks on exclusive male language and leadership within our churches. And justly so. But at the same time that the power of the male God and his earthly troupes is filtering down to the lower eschelons, the new face of God must begin to take shape among us. There is fire at our fingertips. Its use for creativity and comfort rather than destruction will depend on the shape of our theology. As the masks fall away and God’s face comes into focus, what do we see?

There is some irony and yet excitement in the whereabouts of feminist theological insights today. Certainly the explorations are not confined to women in the church. Often it is those who have left the church or those who are juggling a symbol system other than Christian who venture into these uncharted areas. Mary Daly, Doris Lessing, Adrienne Rich, Holly Near, and Ntozake Shange are a few. Although each differs from the other in language and style, the impulse of all is expressed in Shange’s passionate assertion: “I found God in myself, and I loved her. I loved her fiercely.”¹

God in myself—ourselves. That brings the quest closer to home but no less complex. The question, “Who is God?” becomes a question of our own identity as women. What is the nature of this self as reflective of the nature of God? We’re too aware of our limitations, and particularly of our tendencies toward self-deception, to embrace Shange’s challenge without further exploration.

The importance of her assertion is the setting of the agenda. Although our goal is a new theology, revelation will not so much occur in the heavens as in the sharpening of our own way of seeing. The self is a chaotic complex of

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¹Ntozake Shange, *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow is Enuf: A Choreopoem* (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1977), p. 63.

many images vying for recognition and prominence. Our need for a master image that can realign the lesser ones is another way of stating our need for God.² In unmasking the traditional God, or put otherwise, in shaping a master image of the self, what do we see?

Wonder Woman is our first alternative. Now despite the attraction of Lynda Carter in strapless shirt and hot pants, we know that today's real wonder woman is much more subtle and sophisticated. She has the same vital statistics as Lynda—trim yet well-endowed and topped off by a stunning facile profile. Her wrinkleless pantsuit and leather attache case allude to her status as a well-paid professional with solid academic credentials. And she doesn't come from outer space but from house-beautiful—replete with gleaming no-wax floors, shirts in the closet without a trace of "ring-around-the-collar," and three healthy children who never stop smiling.

The inadequacy of this lovely lady for our master image of self should be obvious. As women we know that a modern-day wonder woman doesn't sweat or menstruate, and certainly deserves no place on a pedestal. It is not only her perfection that makes us all pale in comparison. Even more obnoxious is an idealized self that is completely unscathed by the suffering characteristic of all life on this earth. By lack of identification with any of the many forms of poverty and oppression in our human communities and eco-systems, she is irrelevant to their liberation.

In Christian circles, we have had our share of wonder women—usually poking up their heads at least once each year in the profuse praise of mothers on "their special day." We who are mothers suffer through this foolishness—half yearning for the flowers, the cards, the thank-you's and half angry at the supposed effectiveness of a one-day guilt trip that only sets into motion another year of unrecognized labor. From Protestant pulpits we hear the glories of the good wife of Proverbs 31, or from Catholic clergy, the gentleness and patience of the Virgin Mary. What we don't hear often enough are the ways these images have functioned in our traditions to suppress women.

The wisdom tradition that spawned the good mother image of Proverbs 31 is a case in point. How lofty are the praises for this woman who fulfills so well her duty to family. She is "far more precious than jewels" (31:10); trusted by her husband (31:11), and praised by her children (31:28). Honor and prosperity for the clan is the natural outcome of her labor.

Obviously excluded from the benefits of this idealization are all women without spouse or without children or without wealth. Even those few who do qualify must beware of any sign of rebellion, for within the same book of Proverbs are repeated denunciations for the contentious wife, presented here as sympathy for the husband. Poor man. His wife is like "a continual dripping

²The dangers of the inadequacy of Albert Speer's master image and implications for Christians is found in the article by S. Hauerwas and R. Bondi, "Self-Deception and Autobiography: Reflections on Speer's *Inside the Third Reich*"; *Truthfulness and Tragedy*; (University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, IN: 1977) by Hauerhaus, Bondi, and D. Burell.

on a rainy day” (27:15), or like “rotteness in his bones” (12:4). To restrain her is “to restrain the wind” or “to grasp oil in the hand” (27:16). Rather than living with a fretful woman, “it is better to live in the desert” (21:19) or “to hide away in the corner of the attic” (21:9).

More revealing yet is the development of wisdom in the Book of Jesus ben Sirach, written only a few hundred years after the final compilation of Proverbs. Again we find high praise for the woman who fulfills her duty to the family:

A wife’s charm delights her husband,
and her skill puts fat on his bones.
Like the sun rising in the heights of the Lord
so is the beauty of a good wife in a well-ordered home.
(Sirach 26:13,16)

Practically in the same breath is a diatribe against the woman who rebels:

From a woman sin had its beginning,
and because of her we all die.
Allow no outlet to water,
and no boldness of speech in an evil wife.
If she does not go as you direct,
separate her from yourself.
(Sirach 25:24-26)

Even the good wife is suspect solely on the basis of her sex:

Do not sit in the midst of women;
for from garments comes the moth,
and from a woman comes woman’s wickedness.
Better is the wickedness of a man
than a woman who does good.
(Sirach 42:12b-14a)

The idealization of women and the repression of real women go hand-in-hand.

Although the Virgin Mother’s image is much more diverse and inviting than the banal facade of wisdom’s lady, the overwhelming effect of Mary’s divinization has also been stultifying to the progress of women. Despite Pope Paul VI’s suggestion that the Virgin be a Christian model of the liberated woman, many Catholics have rejected her as too entrenched within the mind-set of patriarchy. If we must have a Mary, and a biblical one at that, then give us Mary Magdalene—Mary the friend and disciple of Jesus rather than Mary the sinless womb that bore him.³

³Rosemary Radford Reuther, “Mistress of Heaven: the Meaning of Mariology,” *New Woman/New Earth: Sexist Ideologies and Human Liberation* (New York, NY: Seabury, 1975), pp. 36-59.

But the traditionalists are not the only ones in our churches promoting female images that border on the unreal. Some feminist scholars with excellent credentials and skills display a tendency for large conclusions and sweeping generalizations in their eagerness for positive feminine models.

Phyllis Tribble succumbs to this in her depiction of Eve as a bright, young seminarian. In Tribble's words:

The response of the woman (Eve) to the serpent reveals her as intelligent, informed, and perceptive. Theologian, ethicist, hermeneut, rabbi, she speaks with clarity and authority. Although the divine words of prohibition were addressed to the earth creature (Adam), she assumes responsibility for obeying them. . . . The woman, then, finds the tree physically appealing, aesthetically pleasing, and, above all, sapientially transforming. She is fully aware before she eats, her vision encompassing the gamut of life. Moreover, she does not discuss the matter with her man. She acts independently, seeking neither his permission nor his advice. At the same time, she is not secretive, deceptive, or withdrawn. In the presence of the man she thinks and decides for herself. . . . (In contrast) He (Adam) does not theologize; he does not contemplate; and he does not envision the full possibilities of the occasion. Instead, his one act is belly-oriented, and it is an act of acquiescence, not of initiative. If the woman is intelligent, sensitive, and ingenious, the man is passive, brutish, and inept.⁴

Suffice it to say, such an Eve swings too radically from naive helpmate to Wonder Woman. We can't help but suspect that Tribble's Eve is overstatement—an historical whitewash of the intentions of the Yahwist writer.

What Tribble tries to accomplish in her depiction of Eve, other feminist scholars have tried in their depictions of goddesses of the Ancient Near East. Merlin Stone, author of *When God Was a Woman*, makes a solid contribution to Old Testament scholarship in uncovering the influence of Astarte-Asherah in the ancient Hebrew settlements in Canaan. Her weakness lies in the assumption that a female deity necessarily gave her female worshippers a higher, more autonomous status in society.⁵ A more measured appraisal of the sociological effects of goddess worship is found in Sarah Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores*,

⁴Phyllis Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1978), pp. 110, 112-113.

⁵Merlin Stone, *When God Was a Woman* (New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1976), Chapters 8 and 9.

*Wives and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity.*⁶

Again shifting the focus of the time and culture to that of the ancient Gnostic literature, we find a similar critique of Elaine Pagels' work on the Gnostic Mother. According to PHEME PERKINS, antiquity may not have been as liberating to women as we would like to believe.⁷

My intention is not to discount the excellent contributions of these feminist historians, nor to dismiss the importance of goddess worship in antiquity for our self-understanding today. It is more a warning against securing for ourselves a Wonder Woman image—past or present—that impedes our progress toward an honest appraisal of our own situation and an appropriate response.

At the outset, the two proposed alternatives for imaging God were Wonder Woman or Housewife. Having dismissed the former, one can anticipate some resistance in even entertaining the possibility of God as Housewife. What is a housewife if not overly dependent, self-sacrificial, boring, and puttering around in a world bordered by the supermarket, the pediatrician's office, and K-Mart? Even the Moral Majority would be suave enough to substitute the more civil terms of homemaker or full-time mother for that of housewife.

And if the term of housewife isn't demeaning enough among women, one might try listing it as a qualification on a job resume. Grace Hickinger, in an essay on Mother's Day for *Newsweek* gives the scenario of a father who stayed home for three years with his two small daughters while his wife attended medical school. She concludes: "When he wanted to return to work, an executive recruiter told him: 'There isn't a male I know of in an executive position who would accept raising kids as a legitimate excuse for not working for three years.'"⁸ What could well be recognized as a strength in organizing and managerial skills is seen in the business community as an inexcusable liability. To the "real" world of moneymakers and power brokers, a housewife is part

⁶Pomeroy develops the important distinction between myth and cult in discussing the sociological effects of goddess worship: "Myths represent goddesses as hostile to women, or show them pursuing many activities foreign to the experience of mortal women. In cult, on the other hand—that is, in the ceremonial veneration of these divinities by women—attention is paid both to the fulfillment of women's needs and to the delineation of their proper roles in society." See *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity* (New York, NY: Schocken, 1975), p. 9. For a similar critique from the area of Old Testament studies, see Paul D. Hanson, "Masculine Metaphors for God and Sex-discrimination in the Old Testament," *Ecumenical Review* 27 (1975).

⁷PHEME PERKINS, *The Gnostic Dialogue: The Early Church and the Crisis of Gnosticism* (New York, NY: Paulist, 1980), p. 136, footnote 10: "We are skeptical of those who use this picture of Mary to claim that the Gnostics upheld community leadership by women in opposition to the male dominated hierarchy of the orthodox church; so Pagels 'What Became of God the Mother?' *Signs* 2 (1977), 300 ff. Mary is the hero here not because of an extraordinary role played by women in Gnostic communities, but because she is a figure closely associated with Jesus to whom esoteric tradition may be attached. Gnostic writings share a common presupposition of ancient ascetic writings: 'Femininity is to be destroyed.'"

⁸Grace Heckinger, "Happy Mother's Day," *Newsweek* (May 11, 1981), p. 19.

of an assumed support system and nothing more. Listing “housewife” as a job qualification for an executive position would not only be counter-productive, but in some cases, offensive.

There is a sense in which the offense of housewife is most keen for those most enamored with Wonder Woman. After all, it was Nietzsche, singing the praises of the superman Zarathustra, who perceived most keenly the offense of the crucified Christ. Yet it is just the scandalous aura of the housewife image that makes it worthy of further attention. Again looking to the work of our sisters in literature, it is the image that makes us squirm that is most creative and honest. Toni Morrison, honored on a *Newsweek* cover as a novelist of black magic, doesn’t choose the dignified image of “black” for her characters. One of her books is entitled *Tar Baby*, with leading man, Nigger Jim.⁹ Feminist theologians too have found the power of derogatory words. Mary Daly gives a positive re-interpretation to the images of harpie, hag, spinster, crone, and fury.¹⁰ Naomi Goldenberg speaks for other radical seekers in embracing the witch as a type of minister or psychotherapist.¹¹

Much of the power of these words lies in their reflection of the marginal people of our society. A nigger, a hag, a witch, are all on the fringes of our clean-cut, upwardly mobile, American dream communities. And at first glance, housewife doesn’t seem to have that power of marginality. After all, she is not at the fringes but at the nucleus of our social units. Yet she is marginal. She is not cast out and burned like the witch; she is simply paternalized. TV commercials, afternoon soap operas, Mother’s Day sermons, women’s Bible study groups, countless little messages from well-meaning friends and family, all coalesce into a huge psychological and economic barrier to keep her at the center and marginal. She’s at the center of our social structures, and marginal in respect to mobility and social rewards.

What then does it mean for God to be housewife? By putting God and housewife together, it shifts the meaning of both. If God is not Wonder Woman but housewife, then she truly is in Whitehead’s words, “the suffering one who understands.”¹² Instead of standing outside our social and ecological structures beckoning us to denial of body and nature, the housewife God would be with humanity at the core of our mundane lives and concerns. She would be the incarnation of divinity, not in the ancient sense of a divine man (or in this case woman), but in her interdependence with each element and being of the natural order. God would indeed be immanent.

The importance of this assertion lies in the appropriate focus of religious commitment. All Wonder Women, whether ancient goddess or modern

⁹Jeane Strouse, “Toni Morrison’s Black Magic,” *Newsweek* (March 30, 1981), pp. 52-57.

¹⁰Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology: Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (Boston, MA: Beacon, 1976).

¹¹Naomi R. Goldenberg, *Changing of the Gods: Feminism and the End of Traditional Religions* (Boston, MA: Beacon, 1979). See especially pp. 85-114 on “Feminist Witchcraft—The Goddess is Alive!”

¹²Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: an Essay in Cosmology* (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1929), p. 532.

glamour girl, transcend the limitations of human existence and push real women toward unattainable goals. While escapism is not a necessary result of a transcendent God, idealized visions of reality can lead away from commitments to the present and from a healthy acceptance of an imperfect self. In contrast, a housewife God demands responsible engagement with the here and now. Recognizing the oppression of our structures for women, men and children; a religious commitment would help us accept our own complicity in these structures and rather than flee from them, make them function for the good.

While the most blatant forms of escapism can be found among those religious communities emphasizing a purely transcendent deity, there are more subtle forms within our own backyard. One is the impetus of the present feminist spirituality movement to live on the boundary—to be separatists in lifestyle, love relationships, faith expression and language. Certainly some effects of this prophetic stance are liberating, but they can also be irrelevant. A “boundary mentality” can too facily dismiss the commitments of the masses and suggest alternatives beyond their reach or desire. While a housewife God provides a searing critique of the “other-worldly” mentality of traditional religion, it also suggests a warning to social radicals exiting from household and hearth. Given a divine housewife, the household must be taken seriously as an arena for change.

To return to an earlier premise, the linking of the images of housewife and God shifts the meaning of both. Having given some attention to the implications of a God with a housewife identity, we now turn to the more difficult task of discerning the contribution of a housewife with divine status. In doing so, it may be helpful to draw upon the now well-known and applauded maxim of Mary Daly: “If God is male, then the male is God.”¹³ Put otherwise, if God is imaged solely in male terms, then the male members of society have special status as representatives of the divine. Analogously, if God is housewife, what does it mean for the housewife to be God?

The problem of course with the housewife image is its susceptibility for abuse. Given the situation stated earlier of many housewives as marginal people cut off from the mobility and social rewards of the larger society, how could a divine housewife be prevented from functioning in an oppressive way—somewhat like the “suffering servant” of Isaiah, the crucified Christ, or the passive Virgin Mary? Given that the housewife is submerged in the demands of an oppressive social structure, what gives her the impetus and power to change that structure, to move forward, to overcome lethargy with creativity and innovation? While interdependence may be a given in the role of housewife, mutuality is not. “Housewife” in and of itself does not suggest any sense of fair play in the dynamics of the household, nor any necessary movement toward it.

¹³Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1973), p. 19.

What then does it mean for the housewife to be God? There are two divergent pathways to take here resulting in conflicting conclusions. For the first, if God is an idealized version of reality, then the housewife God is simply housewife-on-a-pedestal. Instead of bringing a much needed critique to bear on our society's work and power structures, this God would serve to reinforce them. She would give divine sanction to male expectations for a female support system.

But God need not, and surely must not, be confined to the world of ideals in Plato's division of reality. There is another way—the depiction of God within the movement of history itself. This is a God shaping and being shaped by human story; a God of integration and creative transformation of the mundane.

What does it mean for the housewife to be this God? It means that theology cannot be done without her. It means an engagement of the interpreters of reality with the life stories of women—real women from all levels of society and all corners of the globe. Although the housewives of the world differ widely in ability to interpret their own experiences, it is within the concrete, honest telling of their stories that we may discover the seeds of genuine hope. Perhaps it is our role to face the ambiguity of their stories; to share the pain of both the hardship and the invisibility of their lives, and to feel the rays of joy when in little ways and certainly in different ways the barriers are overcome.

Prometheus, as punishment for his audacity toward Zeus, had his liver pecked out by a giant bird. Although we are not likely to encounter the same fate, there is some discomfort in our unmasking task. By changing the face of God, we are dealing with that which is most deep and important about ourselves. The measure of our success will be the measure to which God's power is indeed distributed to the marginal on earth.

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