

Sally McFague – Is God “Mother”?

Language about God

God is, by definition, a very different being from us. We cannot say very much about him, as we only know how to speak of things that we know from within our own experience.

So all we can do is:

- Use **analogy**: say God is very similar to/ really like something else we do know, but only up to a point. Eg God is living (he really, literally does have life, but not only as we know it)
- Use **metaphor**: using a surprising, even inappropriate comparison (a figure of speech) to highlight some attribute or aspect that both are thought to share in some way eg God is a rock (not literally! Not in all respects!).

Why does McFague want metaphor of God as mother to replace metaphor of God as Father?

- **God is ultimately unknowable by us**, so she believes that all language about God is provisional, and not defining (no “truths” about God). So God can’t be defined as Father. Using other metaphors reminds us that no single metaphor can be the “truth” about God. We can only ever have images of God, not definitions.
- **The use of “Father” in Scripture, is culture-dependent** – the bible writers used this metaphor as it expressed their experience of God, in their day and age: an ancient patriarchal culture that subjugated women. Why can’t we express our experience of God, in our own way today? We are just following the example of scripture in doing so.
- **Problems with male God-language**
- **patriarchal culture, subjugates women**: but today we believe all are equal. No-one is superior.
- **Dominating**: Kings/ Fathers issue orders. Expect obedience, fear, awe, submission. We don’t live like this any more.
- **Personal and intervening**: Kings/ Fathers act to rescue us/ save us/ help us – but modern scientific world rejects this kind of divine intervention.
- **Leads to passivity in humans**: Kings hand out benefits or punishments to their subjects, who only need to wait on their pleasure. But today we know we are the ones who are responsible for our world: we have the power even to destroy nature (nuclear, over-consumption).
- **Distant**: royalty is untouchable. Fathers are “out there” somewhere, doing things.
- **Rule/ Obedience-centred**: Kings/ Fathers lay down the law. Expect obedience. Justice is punishing rebels. But it is better to see God-like living as showing care and fairness for the wellbeing of all
- **Anthropocentric**: King/ Father metaphors are focussed on human society. But doesn’t that metaphor then exclude the rest of creation?
- **Oppressive**: based on law, fear, justice, rather than care, relationship, mutual responsibility.

McFague's metaphor of God as Mother

- is intimate – mothers nurture, share their physical life with us to fulfil needs, want to draw us to union with her.
- Is related to us – if creation is “bodied forth” – if the world emerges from God as God's body – this better shows our dependence and relatedness to God. God then knows creation “from the inside”, almost as part of himself.
- Is more focused on fulfillment of all, than on obedience : mothers care more about growth, flourishing, fulfillment of their offspring. Sin is preventing *that*, not about rules or rebellion against authority.
- Is Inclusive: a mother cares for all that she “gives birth” to as her own – all creation, not just humans “made in his image”.
- Reflects better that we are in God's image – God is both male and female. Not just motherhood, but other aspects of femaleness must be in God.

Responses to McFague

A. Revelation, not language

- McFague's argument assumes that language about God is a human invention. It isn't – it comes from **divine inspiration**, and is not our right to change.
 - Jesus related himself to God as his Father. He taught his disciples to pray “Our Father” and to see themselves as children of the Father. Jesus was counter-cultural about a lot of things (having women as disciples, eating with sinners) – if he didn't think God really was a Father, why did he make such a point of it?
 - **The Bible only ever speaks of God as Father** – even though in religious cultures of the ancient Near East, it was common to think of God in the form of goddesses. Israel was often tempted to do this – the prophets spoke against it. In keeping to God as Father, Israel was going against Near Eastern culture – *counter-cultural*.
 - **The bible never suggests female/ mother imagery about God makes God a mother** – although it these aspects to be very important, they belong to God *as Father* (as if applied to a human male) – the bible never suggests God could be seen as female. The bible has Moses asking if he “gave birth to this people” (Num 11:12) but that does not question his gender identity.
 - **Bible quotes of God with female imagery:**
 - Deut 32:18 “You deserted the Rock who fathered you; you forgot the God who gave you birth’
 - Ex 16:4 15 – God feeding his people with manna, where feeding was seen as a very female role
 - Isa 66:9-11 “Do I bring to the moment of birth and not give delivery?” says the LORD.”
 - Isa 66:13 “As a mother comforts her child, so will I comfort you”

B. Creation is better explained with God as Father

- **creation is something distinct** from God yet expressive of him and cared for by him. God is over and above it. God as Father shows God's transcendence and immanence. God as Mother only suggests God is in continuity with creation, only immanent, loses sense of transcendence.
- **Father-metaphor better at showing God as origin** and source of everything (Fathers initiate procreation, which is then separate from them) A mother receives life and nurtures it, but doesn't begin it.

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C. God as Father better reveals God's identity/ who God really is (analogy)

- **Father-metaphor shows us how God is both all-powerful and caring.** Mother-god suggests immanence, continuity with creation, loses sense of power/ transcendence/ mystery of God.
- **Father shows that God has full patriarchal authority**, of which earthly fatherhood only a pale reflection. Dominating, distant earthly fathers does not mean the analogy is wrong. As Father, God cares for us individually, with a personal love.
- **the Trinity defines God as Father**; Jesus is his son – the Father-Son metaphor better keeps the sense of how Jesus is distinct from the Father, yet the Father is the source. In his human nature, Jesus sees God as his Father – he has no earthly father.
- **To change metaphor of God as Father, is to change who God is** - there is no "God" apart from God as Father, yet who does have female qualities. Changing the metaphor would change worship of God, and what Christians believe in.

So God as Father: analogy or metaphor?

God as Father is **both analogy and metaphor**

- analogy: God really is a Father, he has the fullness of patriarchal authority and care, beyond what we can even know)
- also metaphor: God is not literally like human fathers who need a corresponding female other to impregnate, in order to give life. God is not literally male in a sexual way. He only shares some features of human fatherhood.

God as Mother can only be **metaphor, not analogy**:

- metaphor: God shares motherhood aspects such as care, inclusive love, nurturing of all creation etc (McFague's points) However, God is not like a human mother in all respects - because mothers do not begin life (they receive and nurture it), and what God creates is distinct from himself while for mothers, the child is part of their body (while in the womb) – creation is not part of the same stuff as God is.
- not analogy: God cannot be literally mother because of points above (God literally does begin life, and creation is not literally part of God).

Quotations:

“All of us, female and male, have the womb as our first home, all of us are born from the bodies of our mothers, all of us our fed by our mothers. What better imagery could there be for expressing the most basic reality of existence” that we live and move and have our being in God?’ (Models of God, p.106)

“Christianity is not a philosophical speculation; it is not a construction of our mind. Christianity is not “our” work; it is a Revelation’ it is a message that has been entrusted to us, and we have no right to reconstruct it as we like or choose. Consequently, we are not authorized to change the Our Father into an Our Mother: the symbolism employed by Jesus is irreversible.” (“The Ratzinger Report”, interviews with Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (later Pope Benedict XVI)

“By calling God “Father” we...indicate that God is the first origin of everything and transcendent authority; and that he is at the same time goodness and loving care for all his children. God’s parental tenderness can also be expressed by the **image** of motherhood, which emphasizes God’s immanence, the intimacy between Creator and creature...He transcends the human distinction between the sexes. He is neither man nor woman; he is God. He also transcends human fatherhood and motherhood, although he is their origin and standard; no one is father as God is Father.” (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 239)