"How much better for theology to conceive of God the Creator as pregnant with the world, giving birth to it and nourishing it, than of God the divine Watchmaker who set the machine ticking millions of years ago." Penelope Washbourne Chen in "Rediscovering the Feminine in God" the Tower alumni magazine

Even though we know that God Himself is not really a male, we have made use of no other images in talking about Him. As Mary Daly has pointed out, images have a way of perpetuating themselves even though we conceptually know better. ("After the Death of God the Father") The image of God as a male authority figure serves to legitimize the structures of subordination (oppression) of women to (by) men. The problem is to conceive God in such a way that God's masculinity does not function as a legitimation system for the oppression of women.

The imaging of God as male has two aspects: 1) the poverty of our language, and 2) the impoverishing of our vision of God by exclusive use of characteristics which our culture has attributed to and limited to the male in conceptualizing and imaging God.

In the first of these two aspects we find images of God as Father, King, Lord; our language has no pronoun which is able to embrace and/or transcend both sexes. Our language forces us to think of God as male; we need words like "she-he", "father-mother", "daughter-son", "brother-sister". Regarding the second aspect: In the Western tradition, particularly the Christian theological tradition our ideas and images have been impoverished by almost exclusive use of "male" characteristics in conceptualizing and imaging God. For example, initiative, transcendence, authority, primacy, leadership, control, and order have all been conceived in static, self-sufficient, abstractly rational terms, in correspondence with masculine stereotypes. An alternative image of God suggested by Penelope Washbourne Chen, imaging God as pregnant, giving birth to, and nurturing the world, presents us with a more dynamic way of conceiving God. Philosophically, this image of God would find expression in the neo-classical metaphysics or process view of reality of Whitehead and Hartshorne, rather than the static ontology of the Greek tradition. This way of imaging and conceiving God is more consistent with the Old Testament image of God's dynamic relation to the people of Israel and the New Testament parables, not to speak of the incarnation. In summary then, adequate alternative conceptions/images of God will have to deal with the problem of the inadequacy of language and will have to enlarge our vision of God by incorporating elements into our vision of God that have previously been regarded as "feminine".

Let us now turn to the alternatives. Underlying the problem of choosing among the alternative conceptions/images of God is the problem of the evaluation of sexual differences. If, for example, one believes sexual differences are a fundamental polarity in human experience, she will find it appropriate to see this polarity reflected in the deity. If, on the other
hand, one does not see sexual differences as a fundamental polarity, she will
be wary of correcting a false male image/concept of God by introducing a
"female" element which may serve to further legitimize a false sexual polarity.
If one is open to the possibility that sexual differences may not be fundamental,
the real question is how to shatter the idol of a male deity without either
1) substituting a reverse idol of a female deity, or 2) legitimizing a false
sexual polarity.

THE ALTERNATIVES

1) One God imagined as male (Christian or Jewish): The other aspects of this
God in the Christian tradition are seen as the male Jesus Christ and the
neuter Holy Spirit. In imaging God as masculine, the human characteristics
attributed to the female are eliminated or denigrated. This has the effect
of negating these characteristics in both male and female human beings.
It also deeply effects the identity of the female. We develop our sense of
identity in relationship to others and to God. The male can, so to speak,
identify with the Father God, whereas the female must distinguish herself from
him. This may lead to self-idolatry in the male and self-denegaration in the
female. When what we are is not considered present in God, it becomes difficult
to see ourselves as "created in the image of God" and it becomes difficult to
see our female humanity in a positive light when our sexuality and the
characteristics present in ourselves are seen as other than those attributed
to God.

2) One God imagined as female (Esther Wool further suggests the trinity of
Mother, Daughter, and Holy Spirit in her article "Theology Confronts Women's
Liberation"): This alternative promises the opposite effects of those we
have found in the first alternative. We are unwilling to accept such
limitations for an image of God—be it male or female.

3) Two Gods imagined as being sexually related: This is a concept present in
some other religions and we cite it as an alternative with the realization that
this particular alternative would not seem to be a live option for us.

4) One trinitarian God with the first person as transcendent ground, the second
person as a male principle, and the third person as a female principle: This
alternative, suggested by Pat Wilson and Penelope Chen is one systematic
alternative for correcting the masculinization of the divinity. It is important
to note that this view is not dependent on a particular view of what
constitutes male and female characteristics, although it will tend to perpetuate
and legitimize whatever view of these differences it appropriates. The
greatest weakness of this view is that it depends on the sexual polarity and
complimentary of the sexes, and hence serves to legitimate an image of
humanity which may be passing. Moreover, this view does not counter the image
of the first person as Father, and unless that image dies an unlikely death,
the Godhead will still be conceived as primarily male. The (therefore
primary) person of the trinity has remained male.

5) One God, totally transcendent of sexual polarity: Mary Daly advocates Paul
Tillich's Ground of Being as an alternative to the patriarchal deity. We
doubt that this would solve the problem. Images don't die easily; they must
be shattered. One can speak of God as the Ground of Being and still imagine Him as belonging to the male sex (or having the attributes thereof). More seriously, we believe it is important to maintain the personal dimension in our images of God and this we find lacking in the language of total transcendence.

6) One God with double imagery: We have chosen this final alternative as, at this point, the one we would support. We see it as necessarily including an effort to avoid reifying the sexual polarities existing in our culture by seeing characteristics which are now labeled masculine or feminine as collectively expressing human nature.

This approach would draw on those aspects of the Old and New Testaments which point to God using images from feminine experience. For example, Luke 15:8 describes God’s joy over a sinner who repents as that of a woman who finds a lost coin, and Isaiah 49:15 says that God is an even better mother than a human mother.

We adopt this approach conscious that all our language about God is metaphorical. We might pray to God as Father-Mother, as Mother-Father, or now as Mother, now as Father, and call God He-She or She then He or stop referring to Her/Him in the third person at all. We might imagine new metaphors and parables from female experience which would add richness and plurality to our impoverished vision of God. We would hope that the images drawn from female experience would not only be those of motherhood, but like the parable of the coin would use as well, the human, non-sexual experiences of women as a starting point.

This enterprise of the imagination would have the effect of breaking the hold of maleness on our image of God without at the same time legitimating sexual polarity. Moreover, the doubleness of the imagery would emphasize the fragmentary character of all language about God and check the tendency to imagine that our imagery encompasses God.

Both female and male would be able to identify with this God but neither would be able to make a self-idolatrous identification with God because neither would be able to encompass Her/His fullness. Through this imagery we would be presented with an image of our own interdependence with one another.

On this understanding, the uniqueness of Jesus may give way to an increased awareness of the divine presence in all human beings (Daly). Or perhaps Jesus’ maleness like his Jewishness will remain part of the scandal of his particularity. If the latter is the case it might be interesting to imagine the spirit as feminine, but to see the work of Christ and the Spirit as fundamentally similar, not as the feminine and masculine work of God.