Feminine Names for “God” and Public Theology

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Prefatory Remarks:

This is a working paper. It represents the revised draft of a paper prepared for Protestant and Catholic ethicists. The session for which it was originally written was not primarily a feminist event. So this paper still bears the marks of my assumption that some of the audience would not be familiar with even major works in feminist theology.
The images, metaphors, and language of Christian theology have important social implications for believers and -- given the cultural influence of Christianity -- for nonbelievers as well. Christian imagery denoting Ultimate Being has been overwhelming masculine. Male centered metaphors for God contribute significantly to a culture in which male supremacy is, at times, simply the taken-for-granted state of affairs and a culture in which female power is too often distrusted. Gender issues related to God-talk are not just internal church controversies. Questions related to gender and god-talk have significance for the larger culture. In this paper, I propose that our public theology -- our theological and ethical discourse addressed to the broad civil society -- ought to incorporate female images, metaphors and language when speaking about Divine Being.

Public Theology: Some Initial Comments

Religion in the Americas always has had a specifically public dimension. There are indisputable, but contested, religious influences upon public culture in the Americas at the end of the twentieth century. Moreover, our public religious language has an important moral dimension. In U.S. contemporary culture, as in all cultures, there are important connections between familiar concepts about Ultimate Being and ideals for communal life.

In this paper, I am presupposing an expansive view of the role of theology in the public forum of politics, culture, and the media. I am interested in the impact of theology upon the social institutions through which political and economic decisions are made and the institutions through which social and cultural patterns are established and maintained. By public theology I mean careful reflection upon the significance of our religious beliefs and our faith commitments for life in the public sphere. A public theology seeks to clarify the ways in which our religious
understandings and experiences contribute to our conception of the common good.

The social context for an American public theology is a pluralistic society in which many persons who occupy the public realm with us do not share our religious convictions. Moreover, U.S. culture is increasingly influenced by forces of globalization. Globalization situates American communal life more firmly in a religiously pluralistic global context – a context in which Christianity is not the dominant religion. Faced with growing religious diversity, Catholic public theology as an enterprise assumes that Catholic religious symbols and language are, in some meaningful sense, comprehensible to many fellow citizens who are not fellow believers.

Thus, in this paper, I am not taking the view of public theology -- congenial especially to some natural law thinkers from the Roman Catholic tradition -- that states that religious persons, when making moral arguments in the public sphere, ought to restrict themselves to religiously neutral, philosophical concepts – concepts that have the potential to be equally as persuasive to nonbelievers. I appreciate the Catholic tradition’s regard for the moral wisdom achieved when human reason reflects upon the human condition. Particularly as a Catholic feminist ethicist, I am not denigrating the taking of public positions supported by reasoned arguments that are equally accessible to nonbelievers. However, a strictly “rational” natural law approach to public theology is not enough for me as a Catholic feminist ethicist. One serious danger with the rational discourse that characterizes this type of public theology is that -- under current cultural conditions -- it leaves a male God as the unchallenged Lord of the public square.

My approach in this paper is also consistent with a recovery in Roman Catholic moral theology (during the second half of the twentieth century) of an appreciation for the central importance of scriptural sources in doing all theology. A particularly impressive methodological example of the use of biblically based theological appeals is found in the U.S. Catholic Bishops’
“Economic Justice for All” – an example of public theology at its finest. In that document the bishops developed a set of central moral norms firmly anchored in biblical roots.

The model for public theology that I am proposing also involves a use of explicitly religious appeals. I have found helpful by some insights from David Tracy. My approach envisions the telling of religious stories and appeals to religious symbols and imagery with a confidence in their "authentically public character." [Tracy, 6] I propose a public theology that invites engagement with fellow citizens through appeals to their empathetic and imaginative capacities. It is my contention that feminist ethicists need to introduce a plurality of feminist theological images and linguistic terms into public religious discourse -- confident that these images and words have, or will come to have, "an authentically public character." Thus I am proposing that -- difficult and acrimonious as the debate about female God-language is -- Christians need to carry on their conversation about female God language within view of a wider American public.

Thus, I agree with our president Kenneth Himes and his brother Michael who declare that "the assumption of public theology is that the symbols of religious faith carry public meanings." [Himes, 4, emphasis added] However, we have to recognize more seriously than we yet have that some of the public meanings of our present Christian God-talk are detrimental to women. While she was not explicitly discussing “public” theology, Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza has given us an important reminder that all Christian theology is, at least in this moment of history, public theology. Schussler Fiorenza declares: “Bible, [church] history, and theology are important not only for religious communities. Rather, as ‘master narratives’ of Western culture, they are always implicated in and collude with the production and maintenance of systems of knowledge that either foster exploitation and oppression or contribute to a praxis and vision of liberation.” [1994,
In addition, I am suggesting that the taken for granted masculine language used particularly in public situations (because of its familiarity) contributes, sometimes inadvertently, to the subordination of women in every realm of life. As Latin American liberation theologian Juan Segundo warned in another context: "Our unjust society and our perverted idea of God are in close and terrible alliance." (quoted in Johnson, 14) This is nowhere more true than in "the close and terrible alliance" between male supremacy and exclusively masculine God-talk. The continued subordination of women in the family, the church, the workplace, and the political arena seems more fitting -- less open to transformation -- in a cosmos in which the Son rules as Lord from His place at the right hand of the Father.

The claim that there is a morally pernicious "feedback loop" between male supremacy and exclusively masculine imagery and language for God has been one of the earliest and most basic insights of those feminists who have turned their attention to religion. Throughout the history of the nineteenth-century women's rights movement, some feminists charged that the male images for God that are venerable in Christian tradition have become idols that legitimate the oppression of women. Pioneering feminist theologians such as Rosemary Ruether and Mary Daly were quick to pont out the dangers of exclusively masculine conceptions of God. More recently, Elizabeth Johnson has warned that reliance on exclusive (or, I would add, heavily dominant) male language and images for the Deity "serves in manifold ways to support an imaginative and structural world that excludes or subordinates women. Wittingly or not, it undermines women's human dignity as equally created in the image of God." [5] I argue that, in this historical moment, only a pluralistic Christian theology in which diverse female images for Divine Being are prominent is fully consistent with any public policy stance that seeks to promote the full human dignity of women.
Female Imagery for God

If there is to be such a feminist public theology, then a central question is "How do we speak Her name in the public square?” In the last decade we have begun to have enough constructive, feminist, theological work on the question of God-talk to begin to construct a feminist public theology. In this paper I lift up female images of God/dess from the work of three prominent theologians, Sallie McFague, Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, and Elizabeth Johnson, as examples of potential theological resources for constructing a feminist public theology. I have chosen to concentrate on two images for the Divine in particular, God the Mother and Sophia-Spirit.

God Our Mother

I have chosen the image of God the Mother both because it figures prominently in the work of McFague and Johnson and because it is an accessible term for public discourse. God our Mother has a powerful resonance for some people, in part, because it is arguably one of the most ancient human symbols for the Divine Source of All Being. Thus, there is something strangely familiar about contemporary talk of God our Mother. Moreover, God as Mother is a biblical image, albeit a more minor one. She is found particularly in the Hebrew scriptures. Passages in Deutro-Isaiah, for example, describe God as like a woman giving birth. (Is 42:14; 45:10) She is even more faithful than a human mother. "Can a mother forget her infant, be without tenderness for the child of her womb? Even should she forget, I will never forget you." (Is 49:15) [Gruber, 3-15]

As evidence of the psychological and cultural accessibility of the image of God our Mother, I cite a surprising example of female God imagery in the public discourse of a Pope. This example was unearthed by Elizabeth Johnson. The quotation is to be found in a 1978 Sunday
address of Pope John Paul I. The pope was addressing pilgrims in Rome while the Camp David
talks between Israel and Egypt were underway. John Paul I reminded a world longing for
peace that human beings are the objects of God's universal love and concern.

"God is our father; even more God is our mother. God does not want to hurt us, but only
to do good for us, all of us. If children are ill, they have additional claim to be loved by
their mother. And we too, if by chance we are sick with badness and are on the wrong
track, have yet another claim to be loved by the Lord." [Johnson, 172; Osservatore
Romano English edition 21 Sept 78; see also Theology Digest 30 (1982)132-33.]

Thus John Paul I declared a sin-sick, strife-torn humanity could ultimately be confident of the
love and succor offered by a God whose love is like that of a concerned mother.

John Paul I's evocation of God as Mother is unusual in recent male, Christian theology.
Father imagery has loomed so large in Christian theology that it has almost obliterated Mother
imagery. The more limited tradition of maternal imagery for God in scriptures, particularly
Hebrew scriptures, has received little attention in mainstream Christian circles. Indeed, Johnson
charges that "the maternal relationship as a pointer to the divine has been actively denigrated and
consciously erased from the repertoire of suitable images. This erasure accompanied the
emergence of patriarchy as the dominant ideology within the Christian community."[173] In the
second century CE, male leaders of the church struggled to establish the value of patriarchal
headship as the norm for Christian family life; they strove to secure their authority as bishops; and
they fought to protect what they saw as the one true faith. In the minds of some male theologians,
female imagery along side male imagery threatened to foster a multiplicity that might undermine
the monotheism of Christianity. In a patriarchal society, if the one true God must be either
mother or father, then He was Father. In addition feminine imagery for God was associated with

“heretical” challenges by female religious leaders to the authority of orthodox, male bishops. Therefore, female imagery for the Divine was suppressed. [Pagels, 70-83]

McFague and Johnson seek to recover and to elaborate upon the fragmentary appeals in the Christian tradition to God our Mother. For both theologians, God the Mother is the creative source of all that exists. She is the matrix out of which the cosmos and humanity emerge. All life is interrelated because it shares the same unoriginated origin in the bountiful love of the first Mother. Johnson asserts: "all creatures are siblings from the same womb, the brood of the one Mother of the universe . . ." (179) Sallie McFague declares that images of gestation, birth, and lactation have unparalleled to power to express "the interdependence and interrelatedness of all life with its ground." (106)

Like father imagery -- perhaps even more strongly than father imagery -- the mother image emphasizes the bond of relationality between the Creator and all of her creation. The Great Mother who births everything-that-is has an active concern for the well-being of Her world and all its creatures. Johnson suggests that God as Mother imagery is imagery consistent with the fundamental experience that human life and the cosmos are a gift originating in an "absolute mystery of love." [170] It would therefore be consistent with a public theology that stressed the intrinsic worth of Nature, the fundamental shared human dignity of all persons, and the need to give priority to public policies that safeguard Nature or human beings wherever they are especially vulnerable to harm.

Indeed, a key theological move made by McFague, and affirmed by Johnson, is establishing a close association between God the Mother's love for all her creatures and God the Mother's demand for just treatment of all of the created universe. According to McFague, the Mother's justice requires that all creatures receive what is necessary for their survival. It is
crucial to McFague's exposition of God as Mother that the work of justice is a central task for God our Mother. McFague insists on the justice of the Mother-Creator-Judge as a counterbalance to any sentimentalized notion of all-accepting mother love. God as Mother does not passively tolerate threats to her creation. Rather the Mother who labors to bring forth life is active in its protection and defense. The Mother judges negatively whatever harms her offspring and opposes whatever thwarts their safety and growth. McFague tells us: "Those who produce life have a stake in it and will judge, often with anger, what prevents its fulfillment." [113] Johnson concurs and she offers several examples of courageous action in opposition to oppression and tyranny done by ordinary mothers motivated by love and concern for their children. God, like courageous mothers from Latin America, South Africa, and Northern Ireland, demands justice. [Johnson, 181-85; especially 182-83] McFague asserts that the mother-God as judge condemns "as the primary (though not the only) sin the inequitable distribution of basic necessities for the continuation of life in its many forms." (113-14) The Mother's justice is closely related to an ethic of ecological care and responsibility -- everything that comes from the womb of the Mother is good and should be preserved and nurtured. Thus, a theology of God the Mother must be a public theology.

Drawbacks of Mother Imagery

Despite the suppression of the Mother in patriarchal religions, God our Mother may still be a relatively accessible female image for God, but this image is also problematic in important ways. Talk of God the Mother can readily evoke and support socially constructed stereotypes concerning women. Especially as a sole or primary female image for the divine, talk of God our Mother provides a strong temptation toward the eternal feminine that has been so detrimental to many women. Certain forms of talk about God our Mother would be consistent with forms of patriarchal gender dualism that subtly – and not so subtly – undermine the full humanity of
Both Johnson and McFague are quick to point out the limitations of God our Mother imagery. Both of them use the image of God our Mother only in the context of a multiplicity of images and only after emphasizing the limitations of any metaphor. McFague is concerned to avoid cliches about motherhood as a stereotypically feminine activity -- to fend off notions of weakness, passivity, and sentimentality. She talks about the physicality of birth and lactation, in part, to counter any tendency to focus on an ethereal, sentimentalized notion of motherhood.

The complexity of motherhood in the experiences of women makes imagery naming God as Mother especially difficult for some women. In a society where is still a residual assumption that motherhood is the central role for all adult women, women who are not mothers may be ambivalent about, or repelled by, God our Mother imagery. Maternal imagery may not be appealing to women who could have children, but choose not to become mothers. God as Mother may be a particularly painful metaphor for women who are involuntarily infertile or who would otherwise like to be mothers, but have not found themselves in circumstances where they could responsibly become a parent. Destructive and divisive social ideals about “good mothers” can be a weapon that inflicts great harm and pain on lesbian mothers or mothers who need public assistance or who are among the working poor.

The institution of motherhood has a problematic configuration in the socio-cultural history of middle-class, European-American women. Both McFague and Johnson differentiate between women's actual experiences of gestation, birth and nurture and the social ideals associated with Motherhood. For nineteenth and twentieth-century, middle-class, European-American women, motherhood has too often been characterized by isolation, passivity, limitless demands, and a destructive selflessness.
European-American feminist theologians also need to acknowledge that mothering as nurturing activity provides some common ground for white and black women, but it also divides them in other ways. This is the case both historically and in contemporary society. Therefore, when considering God the Mother imagery, it would be especially important to be attentive to the commentaries by womanists and black feminists who investigate African-American women's experiences of motherhood.

Both their biological capacities to birth new lives and their social skills of nurturing have historically been sources for bitter exploitation for African-American slave women. Slave women were raped by their masters and bred like animals to re/produce babies who were the property of their masters. Mothers and their children were liable to be sold away from one another at any time. Still, many slave mothers did their utmost to nurture their children as long as they had the opportunity to do so.

Under slavery, in the role of mammy and, later, as black domestics, African-American women were exploited as child care providers by economically privileged, white women. Working-class African-American women and other women of color continue to be exploited disproportionately as child care workers today. Jobs as child care workers in private homes and in day care centers often provide low-pay, few benefits and uncertain job security.

According to black feminist sociologist Patricia Hill Collins, African-American women "define, value, and shape Black motherhood as an institution" in diverse ways in contemporary society. [Hill Collins, 188] Within the African-American community, other people sometimes make inordinate demands on African-American mothers. Some black people romanticize the nurture of black mothers in ways that are detrimental to individual mothers and to the community as a whole. [Hill Collins] The importance of African-American women as ingenious nurturers...
of their families and communities is recognized and celebrated in the ecclesiastical office "mother of the church" within certain Protestant groups. Yet, it must be acknowledged that in many instances the mothers of the church play their supportive role in a fashion that undergirds the patriarchal authority of the male pastor. [Williams, 35, 79, Gilkes]

While African-American women's nurturing skills oft times have been unjustly exploited, these skills are also valuable in their own right. African-American nurturers have contributed positively to the lives of many European-American children and families. Much more important, black mothers have enlivened and anchored the homes of many black families. Black women as mothers have provided among the most significant survival skills available to the African-American community. Black women's determination that the community's children would have a better future has been an important taproot of community activism. [Hill Collins, chap 6] African-American women have diverse experiences of motherhood, some related to other aspects of their lives such as their class or sexual orientation. Therefore, images of God as Mother are likely to resonate in complex ways in the hearts of African-American women. European American feminist theologians need to be aware that maternal images and language will resound differently for diverse individuals and communities.

God the Mother’s Impact on Father Imagery

The patriarchal abuse of masculine God-talk is closely related to its exclusivity. This suggests to me that cherished masculine images for the divine might be salvaged precisely through a public theology that made frequent use of female symbols, images, and language for the Divine. Theologian Sallie McFague is right when she explains the importance of a metaphorical theology as an expression of our experiences with the Ultimate Power that sustains our whole life, including our public life. According to McFague all God language "has to do with how we relate
to God rather than defining the nature of God." She continues: "We can envision relating to God as to a father and a mother, to a healer and a liberator, to the sun and a mountain. As definitions of God, these possibilities are mutually exclusive; as models expressing experiences of relating to God, they are mutually enriching." [39]

In a pluralistic theology, male metaphors for God would be cherished along with many other metaphors, including many female ones. In particular, we might actually revive the spiritual power of the Abba or Father image for God by recontextualizing it. If Father were only one metaphor along with an equally revered Mother metaphor, this new configuration of metaphors for Divine Power might make a real difference in our perception of the Father. The patriarchal cast of the Father image both reflects and reenforces patriarchal societies in which the Father ruled his household. If the Father image were effectively played off against an equally strong and compelling Mother image, then He would no longer be the uncontested patriarch. As McFague says, a richer set of images for the divine would yield a new understanding of God the Father -- one that pushed the metaphor in "a parental rather than a patriarchal" direction. [McFague, 20]

This is especially important because the human meaning of fatherhood is contested in American culture today. Conservative social groups are attempting to reassert a patriarchal view of fatherhood. Some conservative leaders are challenging men to reassume their God-given role as head of the family. A parental, but not patriarchal, God the Father -- as one metaphor among a new constellation of metaphors including powerful female metaphors -- would challenge a movement to reassert male dominance in the family.

European-American feminist theologians also need to be aware of the different valence of Father imagery and language as applied to God in the African-American community. Given a particular history of family life under slavery and in a racist society and culture, many African-
American women find a loving God the Father to be a powerful presence. Slavery and the racist economic and social conditions that followed slavery have made it more difficult for some black men to be reliable partners in parenthood with black women. Womanist theologian Delores Williams speaks of the "the continuous devaluation of black fatherhood in North American society. This means that the mammy chore of protector -- as the one standing between children and the cold, cold world -- has remained the responsibility of many black women." [80] In this context, the image of God as a strong, reliable father, has a particular power for some African-American men and women. European-American women should voice their talk of God our Mother in a way that enhances and liberates God our Father, not a way that denigrates his loving presence in the lives of many.

Sophia-Spirit

In addition to the complex image of God our Mother, we need to call on other, less well-known female names for the divine. Precisely because of the double-edged feminine lure of God our Mother, I must explore other images for God/dess. In this essay, I have chosen to explore the alternate image of Spirit-Sophia, God/dess with us throughout history sustaining us on the journey toward the fullness that She wills for creation.

For many Americans, including Americans of the Christian faith, Sophia or Wisdom is a less familiar image from the Bible. Wisdom in Hebrew scriptures and in later Jewish thought is God's presence with God’s people in the world. She is the Wisdom of God, who goes among the people showing them the ways of justice. (cf. Proverbs 8:20) Elizabeth Johnson concludes that what is stressed in the references to Sophia, in the Hebrew scriptures, when taken as a whole, is "God's own being in creative and saving involvement with the world." The Wisdom passages are
"ways of asserting the one, transcendent God's nearness to the world. . .." [91]

I have been particularly challenged by the way in which Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza has resituated Jesus as Sophia’s prophet. Indeed, Schussler Fiorenza states that "the earliest Palestinian theological remembrances and interpretations of Jesus' life and death understand him as Sophia's messenger and later as Sophia herself." [1983, 134] I note that Johnson finds this work theologically stimulating as well. Johnson declares that Jesus' ministry can be aptly described as a proclamation of Sophia-God's love and saving will for the world. Viewed in the context of first century CE Jewish spirituality, it is possible that Jesus of Nazareth understood himself and was understood by others as the prophet and child of Sophia-God sent to announce Her all-inclusive love and her dawning reign with its justice and well-being for all. It is faithfulness to the inclusive-love of Sophia-God that brings her prophet Jesus to a humiliating death on the cross. The post-Easter community of his followers announces that Her saving power was not defeated however. Johnson reminds us: "The crucified one is not, in the end, abandoned. Sophia-God gathers her child and prophet into new transformed life, promise of a future for all the dead and the whole cosmos itself." [159] Johnson asserts that it is a Christian confession of faith that, in and through Jesus of Nazareth, Sophia-God was present to humanity in a particularly powerful way. Jesus Christ is, for Christians, a central manifestation of Sophia-God's presence among us accompanying humanity in its struggle for survival, justice, fulfillment and salvation.

What attracts me particularly in theological work that describes Jesus as Sophia’s prophet is the potential of this theme to provide an alternative to focusing overwhelmingly on Jesus as God the Father’s faithful Son. As I have already indicated, I am NOT suggesting that we abandon Father-Son imagery, but rather that we resituate Father-Son imagery within a richer, more varied system of images.
Thus in Johnson's constructive theological work, Spirit-Sophia is the name for Divinity "drawing near and passing by in quickening, liberating compassion " [131] It seems to me that it would be particularly appropriate to invoke Sophia-Spirit in public theology, for She is God/dess met and recognized in and through Her presence in the world. She is the Deity with us in the world yesterday, today and tomorrow. Sophia Spirit is a liberating God/dess who moves freely on the earth, empowering her children in surprising ways. She is "effective wherever fragments of freedom and healing gain a foothold in the struggling world" (122)

Throughout history, women who have felt themselves called to proclaim God's will despite socio-economic and cultural obstacles have often claimed to be empowered by the Spirit. Her liberating presence has graced the lives of many women who have been denied officially recognized leadership roles in patriarchal churches. Spirit-Sophia is the power that undergirds protracted human resistance to evil, oppression, and the forces of destruction. Johnson declares that: “Wherever we encounter the world and ourselves as held by, open to, gifted by, mourning the absence of, or yearning for something ineffably more than immediately appears, whether that "more" be mediated by beauty or joy or in contrast to powers that crush, there the experience of the Spirit transpires." [124-25] I want to suggest that one central function of public theology is to evoke a yearning for a common life marked by forms of justice that are “ineffably more than” what we know now. The “more” for which we yearn in our common life includes especially more just forms of relationship between women and men. A public theology that declared that Woman Wisdom draws us powerfully toward right gender relationships could be a crucial part of movement toward greater gender justice.

Sophia-Spirit and Womanist Themes

At this point I find myself speculating about affinities between Spirit-Sophia and Delores Andolsen - Public Theology Working Paper - May 2000, page 17
Williams' God who enabled Hagar – and the generations of African-American women who have identified with Hagar – "to make a way out of no way." In Williams work, Hagar's God is a Deity who first and foremost helps African-American women and their children, male and female, to survive and sometimes to experience "a positive quality of life." Williams contemplates a God who reaches out to imperiled women and children who are almost perishing in the wilderness.

Hagar's story of a compassionate God who from the heavens opens the former slave-woman's eyes to resources for survival in the wilderness bears some similarity to Johnson's life-sustaining Sophia-Spirit. Williams stresses another important point, Hagar's survival and that of her child require both God's power and Hagar's human initiative. God opens her eyes to see water that she had not seen before. Hagar carries the water to her dying child and holds him close as she revives him. God makes a promise to Hagar parallel to the divine promise to Abram: I shall make your descendants too numerous to be counted." (Gen 16:10). But fulfillment of the promise requires Hagar [and Ishmael] to take the initiative to find or create economic, political, cultural, and spiritual resources and to use those resources skillfully in succeeding generations.

There are, of course, significant differences between Spirit-Sophia and the God of Hagar. For example, Johnson's treatment of Sophia-Spirit -- influenced by Jewish tradition -- emphasizes the immanence of God/dess with us in our earthly struggle for survival and liberation. In her exegesis of Genesis 21, Williams stresses the transcendence of a God who offers crucial help from on high. [31] God remains at a distance from Hagar and her son. Still, Johnson does insist that the Spirit is not to be completely identified with God's immanence for she is also always the transcendent God. [147]

I sense some possible affinities between Johnson's Sophia-Spirit and the God of Hagar as Williams presents him, but it would require a cooperative enterprise between womanist
theologians and European-American ones to clarify these connections, if they are genuine.

Limitations of the Sophia-Spirit Image.

Like God our Mother imagery, Sophia-Spirit imagery for the Divine has limitations, especially when employed in public theology. First, this imagery is not initially familiar to many of our fellow citizens or even to many fellow believers. The Wisdom references in the Hebrew Scriptures are not culturally prominent ones. Sophia-Spirit will require an elaborate introduction, if she is to be invoked with comprehension in the public square. At first, a public theology calling upon Her name will be a didactic and, thus, clumsy one.

Second, the theology of Sophia-Spirit that I have taken from Schussler Fiorenza and Johnson rests upon hermeneutical work that is controversial among both Jewish and Christian scholars. The view of Sophia-Spirit and of Jesus understood as her embodiment that I have expounded here is based on reputable biblical scholarship. Still, as a reconstruction of muted strains in both Jewish and Christian thought, this depiction of Sophia-Spirit is open to scholarly challenge.

For example, there is an important controversy about how one ought to understand the status of Woman Wisdom as described in Proverbs 8:22-31. Is she a preexistent being who played an active role in creation or the first creature of God or a child-like female in whom he delights? Or is she both, and, if so, how do we reconcile those differing aspects? Scripture scholar Hans Conzelmann warns more generally about Woman Wisdom: "The statements made by or about Wisdom actually do reflect so many shades of meaning that every attempted explanation can be supported by some texts." [232] For example, Sallie McFague makes limited use of Sophia language, in part, because McFague judges that Sophia as presented in the Hebrew Scriptures is a subordinate deity -- "a secondary persona of God." [114]
It is particularly difficult to know how to described Woman Wisdom as a female figure within a primarily patriarchal, monotheistic, religious system. If He is the one true God, who can She possibly be? Male theologians, Jewish and Christian, have resisted any suggestion that Wisdom is a female divine figure along side the male Yahweh. An exemplar is Gerhard von Rad who declares: “The idea of the age-old existence of wisdom, thought of as a person and speaking so self-confidently, is so strange and fits so ill with all that we otherwise seem to know about early Yahwism, that the question has long been debated whether Israel here is not being influenced by specific non-Israelite mythological ideas.” [152]

Elizabeth Johnson’s response is that male scripture scholars have downplayed the theological status of Woman Wisdom, because these males were hampered by androcentric biases. While acknowledging that some passages depict Wisdom as a created being, Johnson is drawn toward those passages that portray Woman Wisdom as a female representation of the one true God. [Johnson, 1985] Woman Wisdom can be seen the one God represented as a female figure, just as Yahweh is the one God understood in masculine terms. Still, controversy about the ontological status of Woman Wisdom shows that the interpretation of Sophia-Spirit presented in this paper is definitely debatable as an aspect of biblical theology.

Third, I have lifted Sophia-Spirit up from a body of Wisdom literature that has certain strong misogynous elements. The Wisdom literatures of the ancient near east were androcentric in character. As a whole, this was a literary genre that sought to bring elite, young men to Wisdom. When earthly females appear in the texts, they are often denigrated as wanton, perhaps adulterous, women. Such women are dangerous temptresses who threaten to distract younger men from the path of Wisdom.

In this body of literature, human women are presented as polar opposites -- the virtuous
wife or the adulteress. This common practice of dividing women into two groups -- the ideally virtuous ones and the degenerate, sexually dangerous ones -- is an ancient, but still powerful, means of social control and is detrimental to the well-being of women. From the perspective of its teachings about human women, not Woman Wisdom, the Wisdom books are a body of literature that a feminist should approach with great care.

Who Would Proclaim a Feminist Public Theology?
And on Behalf of Whom?

Exploring images of God our Mother and Sophia-Spirit as concepts potentially useful for a feminist public theology has raised some additional, provocative questions for me. Who would voice such a feminist public theology and on behalf of what religious community would they speak? These are both sociological and ecclesiological questions.

Sociologically, Christian denominations are divided over women's issues and feminist theological concepts. As sociologist Robert Wuthnow explains in his book, The Restructuring of American Religion: "Members of liberal denominations, clergy and church bureaucrats in these denominations, and women with better educations and politically liberal outlooks [are] especially influenced by the claims of the feminist movement." [Wuthnow, p. 227] Clergy and other church officials in the more conservative churches and many of the women and men in the pews in every denomination are critical of some aspects of the feminist movement. Indeed, there is some sociological evidence that women who hold traditional beliefs about women's roles in the family, church, and society are more likely to be active members in the Roman Catholic church and most Protestant churches. In particular, "a study of Catholic women . . . showed that only 26 percent of
those with feminist orientations and at least some college education attended church regularly, compared with 49 percent of those with nonfeminist orientations and comparable levels of education." [Wuthnow, p. 229] Therefore, a public theology that used female imagery and language for God would not initially voice the religious beliefs of many Christians who are deeply committed to traditional, masculine imagery and language.

The question "by whom would a public theology be articulated" is a problematic one, too. To the extent that a feminist “women-church” exists as a sociological phenomenon, its manifestations are primarily in local groups and in occasional national or international conferences on feminist theology and spirituality. It is not clear who is charged with the responsibility of addressing the larger society on behalf of such groups. At present its spokespersons are primarily leaders of voluntary feminist religious associations who are known to the media. I have in mind women such as Frances Kissling, president of Catholics for a Free Choice or spokespeople for the Women’s Ordination Conference. In the liberal Protestant denominations that are more sympathetic to feminist viewpoints, agencies devoted to women's concerns have executives who publicly advocate at least a moderate feminist Christian position. However, as employees of church bureaucracies, many of these persons are under pressure not to take theological positions disturbing to a large portion of the church membership.

From the perspective of feminist ecclesiology, a feminist public theology would be the public discourse of Women-Church, or what Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza calls the ekklesia of women. As described by feminist theologians, the ekklesia of women is a religious body composed of women "who decide their own spiritual welfare." [1983, 349] As a Roman Catholic theologian, Schussler Fiorenza created the term “ekklesia of women” to contest the view that the church is solely its male hierarchical leadership. She challenges the notion that the church
somehow exists apart from -- or over and against -- women. Women have always been members who have made important contributions to the church, although their contributions often have not been memorialized and celebrated. Women are in the church in large numbers today and, hence, they and their experiences and activities are central to the church. Those feminist theologians who are beginning to discuss women-church see it as a community of female believers who assert that they are church and they can give public witness as church.

The ekklesia of women is a community that welcomes and nurtures spiritually diverse women who are united in their struggle to transform societal and ecclesiastical structures of male domination. Still, these women have legitimate disagreements about many aspects of theory and practice. Theologian Rosemary Ruether envisions women-church as a religious assembly made up exclusively of women. For her, it is a transitional stage of church history, one that she trusts will ultimately give way to a renewed church that is "a redemptive community of both men and women liberated from patriarchy." [Ruether, 61] In contrast, Schussler Fiorenza says that men who are dedicated to the struggle to end male supremacy and domination are already participants in the discipleship of equals that is women-church. Many Christian women do not know about or identify with Women-church. At present, women-church is in the words of theologian Rebecca Chopp "a dream born out of marginal, fragmentary reality." [78] Thus, women-church exists in the interstices of many recognized religious bodies. But can a coherent public theology be articulated from the interstices?

Calling Upon Her Name With Fear and Trembling:

Feminist Public Theology Will Provoke Conflict

It is hard to know who is could effectively articulate a feminist public theology. It is easy to predict that such a feminist public theology would initially be divisive not unifying. Several recent controversies concerning the activities of women's agencies within national Protestant bureaucracies demonstrate the lack of a consensus within denominational groups about feminist theological positions. A feminist public theology will involve controversy inside as well as outside the churches. However, this is not unique to feminist public theology. Many, meaningful articulations of public theology are controversial within the churches as well as in the public arena. Remember, for example, the controversy within the American Catholic church and in the larger society that was stirred by the American Catholic bishops' letter “Economic Justice for All.”

Ethicist Bryan Hehir and I agree about the process of doing public theology today, while I suspect that we disagree about elements in the content of an adequate public theology. Hehir has reflected upon how Catholic moral values might be made persuasive for public policy makers. He says the task before moral theologians and church leaders involves "the double challenge of forging a new consensus within the church and articulating it in civil society. These are the two unfinished tasks for the public church." [353]

Women-church faces the same double challenge. It must forge a new theological consensus within the churches concerning God's inclusive and egalitarian love for women and men and also articulate persuasively a vision of gender equality for civil society. An important aspect of this overall task is naming the Divine in ways consistent with the fundamental dignity of women.

There is a deep irony in the call for a feminist public theology, for to speak in Her name in the public square will, at first, be deeply divisive. Instead of potentially uniting Christians, and
perhaps other believers, in support of public policies that promote gender equality, Her Name will divide them from one another.

A clear sign that feminist God-talk will be bitterly contested is the response to an ecumenical meeting for women, called "Re-imaging: A Global Theological Conference by Women," held in Minneapolis, Minnesota in November, 1993. "Re-imaging" received financial support from the national offices of several mainline Protestant denominations. The conference "coincided with the mid-point of the Ecumenical Decade of the Churches in Solidarity with Women, an initiative of the World Council of Churches that started in 1988." The gathering received widespread press attention, because highly critical reports of the meeting were circulated broadly by two conservative religious publications, one Methodist and one Presbyterian.

Critics of the conference expressed a special animosity about calling upon the name Sophia. To call upon a feminine name for the Deity was considered blasphemy and allegedly involved the advocates of such imagery in heresy. Sophia was perceived by critics, not as another name for the one true God of Christianity, but as a separate female Deity. Thus, those who called upon Sophia in conference rituals were branded worshipers of a pagan goddess.

John Burgess and Joseph Small, from the Office of Theology of the Presbyterian Church (U. S. A.) were asked to prepare a report evaluating the conference on the basis of tapes and conference literature, especially printed documents from worship services. Their report clearly identified sources of theological controversy sparked by using feminine names for God in Christian traditions that have long relied on exclusively masculine imagery. The two authors concluded that Sophia language was clearly intended as a name for the one true God, not as the name of a goddess who stood in opposition to the Christian God. Still the authors seriously questioned the prudence of heavy reliance on Sophia imagery, particularly in liturgical prayer.
These two theologians were uneasy that, in using a less familiar name for God, the women at "Re-imaging" had departed too far from the dominant Christian tradition. Thus the report's authors concluded that "conference rituals used new language in ways that imply worship of a divine manifestation distinctly different from 'the one triune God whom alone we worship and serve.'" [Small, 342] As a touchstone of appropriate ritual language, the report's authors state "language proves to be authentic when it reflects the biblical witness to God in Jesus Christ."[4]

A major problem here is that the two men who authored this report did not connect Sophia with the Holy Spirit, the third person of the triune God. They also emphasized traditional Christological formulations heavily and feel compelled to set Wisdom in competition with Jesus the Christ. Having set up an opposition between the Son and Sophia-Spirit, they resolved it in a christological direction. "The New Testament proclaims 'Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God' (I Cor. 1:24), not wisdom as a divine manifestation apart from Jesus Christ." [Small, 343] These men's subordination of the Spirit to the Christ becomes clearer in their critique of a lecture by theologian Rita Nakashima Brock who spoke about the spirit of God at work in the hearts of persons today. The Presbyterian report counters: "God's spirit is not an independent entity; . . . it binds us to Christ." (343) There is a theological irony here. As Schussler Fiorenza and Johnson clearly document Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ through the power of the Spirit, who may appropriately by called Sophia-Spirit. As theologian Johnson reminds us, "the early Christian confession that Jesus is the Christ means precisely this, that he is . . . the one anointed by the Spirit." (150)

Conclusion: Despite their discomfort with Sophia Spirit imagery as used at the Re-imaging conference, Small and Burgess realized that there are members of the Presbyterian Church USA who felt alienated by theological and liturgical discourse in which masculine
language and imagery predominates overwhelmingly. The authors acknowledge that the "exclusion or marginalization" felt by such persons is a genuine problem for the Presbyterian church. I contend here that the marginalization of women that is a consequence of predominantly male language and imagery for God is a problem for the public theology of all the Christian churches as well as their internal theological conversations and liturgical practice.

It is urgent that feminist theologians and ethicists begin to create a feminist public theology. For if we do not use female God-talk in public discourse, we leave the male God as the explicit or implicit Lord of the public square. He and His Power will have imaginative sway throughout culture in the minds of believers and nonbelievers alike. David Tracy speaks of the power of utopian religious symbols that "both disclose shareable human possibilities and expose the reality of the not-yet" in our present-day communal life. [Tracy, 1983, 250] God our Mother and Sophia-Spirit expose the reality of injustice in many of our gender relationships and disclose gender equality as a shareable human possibility. These gender issues are among the realities and possibilities that our public theology should illuminate. In the introduction to She who is, Elizabeth Johnson says: "My hope is that the path ventured upon here will be suggestive of lines of thought and action that proceed deeper into justice toward women and right speaking about God, which are inseparable." [12] Today we need actively to explore the intertwining paths "into justice toward women and right speaking about God" not just within, and for the sake of, Christian communities but in the public square, for the sake a genuine common good.
Bibliography


Endnotes

1 In this paragraph, I began by alluding to Christian influences on culture in the Americas, because, it seems to me, that Christianity is still an important, albeit different, force in all the cultures of the Americas. However, for the remainder of the paper I will speak of the culture that I know best – the culture of the United States of America.

2 Phyllis Trible asserts that there is more maternal imagery in Hebrew Scriptures than is apparent. She argues that there is a linguistic link between the Hebrew word for womb and the word for compassion. God's compassion is likened to a tenderness experienced as a trembling in God's womb. See God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978): 38-53.

3 Interestingly, maternal imagery reemerged in Christian spirituality associated with Jesus and the eucharist. Some Christians viewed Jesus as like a nursing mother in that he feeds believers from his own body. See, for example, Carolyn Walker Bynum, Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982) and Eleanor McLaughlin, "‘Christ My Mother.’ Feminine Naming and Metaphor," Nashotah Review, 15 (Fall, 1975) and her essay in Reconstructing the Christ Symbol: Essays in Feminist Christology, edited by Maryanne Stevens. (Paulist, 1993).

4 Johnson actually uses the term Mother-Sophia. This, in part, reflects her methodological decision to focus on Sophia-Spirit first in her reflections on the Trinity and then to make connections to the first person of the Trinity reinterpreted as Mother-Sophia. The term Mother-Sophia affirms that "Holy Wisdom is the mother of the universe, the unoriginate, living source of all that exists." [179] Because we experience God as active in the world on behalf of inclusive love, we are able to speak about Mother-Sophia as primordial Love.

5 For example, God our Mother might be coopted to support the doctrine of masculine/feminine complementarity so beloved by many conservatives and some members of the hierarchy in the Catholic church.

6 McFague mentions God-Sophia just once and notes Her work in promoting order and justice. In this section, McFague draw upon the hermeneutical work of Schussler Fiorenza.. See McFague pages 100 and 205, n13.

7 A problematic aspect of this description of God which I cannot discuss in this short paper is that God as encountered in Hagar's experience is not always engaged in liberatory action. In her first encounter with God, the pregnant Hagar is told to go back to her abusive slave mistress Sarai and her husband Abram. Williams interprets this as a necessary survival strategy urged by God on the runaway slave woman who was at great risk if she delivered her child alone and without proper resources in the desert. [20-33; 196-99]

8 There is a controversy about how some references to women in the text ought to be translated. Some biblical scholars propose a translation that reads the "foreign woman," not the adulteress woman. However, in the post-exilic period in which Wisdom literature was especially prominent, the foreign woman was viewed as a threat to the integrity of the newly reconstituted Israelite nation. See Newsom.

9 Scripture scholar Claudia Camp might well disagree with the foregoing analysis. She constructs an argument that elements of the Wisdom literature, including the exalted figure of Woman Wisdom, reflect the relatively high social status of women as important contributors to the well-being of Israel in the post-exilic period. Camp, 256-65.

10 This question was suggested to me by Paul Ramsey's book, Who speaks for the church. I am reflecting on Ramsey's question in a new context and I am not employing any of the content of his answer to that question.

11 Schussler Fiorenza's use of “ekklesia of women” is inspired, in part by her interpretation of the meaning of ekklesia as a social institution known to the early Christian missionary communities in the first century CE Roman empire. According to Schussler Fiorenza an ekklesia was a voluntary organization rooted in the association of equals. [1983, 180-83] In this paper, I am concentrating the ecclesiological function of the ekklesia of women. However, in Jesus – Miriam’s Child, Sophia’s Prophet, Schussler Fiorenza claims on behalf of this ekklesia “a critical practice of vision of radical democracy in society and religion.” [1994, 24]


13 Jospeh Small and John Burgess, “Revaluating Re-Imagining,” Christian Century (April 6, 1994): 342. This is a
direct quote, but the source is not given in the article.