BEYOND GOD THE MOTHER: WOMEN, WRITING AND SPIRITUALITY

by

Rosemary Jackson

'Its subject was God that is the inner spirit, the inner voice; the human compulsion when deeply distressed to seek healing counsel and receive it. (It had always amused me that the god who spoke to Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth told them exactly what they needed to hear, no less than the God of the Old Testament constantly reassured the Jews.)'

Alice Walker

'The first step in the elevation of women under all systems of religion is to convince them that the great spirit of the Universe is in no way responsible for any of these absurdities.'

Elizabeth Cady Stanton

The misogyny of the Judaeo-Christian heritage has been fully exposed by feminist scholars over the past twenty years. (1) Taken to a rather dramatic extreme in Mary Daly's dizzying work of anti-patriarchal theology, **Beyond God the Father** (1973), this feminist critique ends up rejecting the very notion of 'God' as being inseparable from 'male imagery' and an oppressively 'masculinist' ideology. Not only Christianity, but all the major world religions have originated with male avatars - Zarathustra, Ram, Krishna, Buddha, Mohammed - and it is hardly surprising that much feminist reaction has been outrage at the lack of any symbolic divine/human figure for/of women, rather than submission to a 'spiritualised' reading which sees these incarnations as beyond gender (e.g. the text of St. Paul, 'In Christ there is neither male nor female'). Anger against religious traditions which have seemed to legitimise inequitable social/sexual relations has led radical thinkers like Daly to counteract their reification of God the Father with a deification of women - not replacing God with Goddess, another static symbol, a 'transsexed patriarchal god', but with women as 'Muses, Spinsters, Websters, Weirds, Hags, Witches, Sibyls, Goddesses! Daly's emphasis is less on the nouns than the verbs they represent, what they **do:** women being, moving, circling, loving, healing.

Much recent fiction by women has explored areas of spirituality which are similarly **outside** the proprietorial regions of 'God the Father'. (2) Marion Bradley's epic Arthurian saga **The Mists of Avalon** (1983) ambivalently reconstructs a Druidic, pre-Christian culture through the consciousness of prophetic women like Morgan le Fay, and spells out some of the lethal effects of Christianity upon female desire, sexuality and vision. From Doris Lessing's influential **The Golden Notebook** (1962), with its fragmented narrative exploring the relation between women's lives, psychic breakdown, writing and healing, to her subsequent novels of 'inner space travel', **The Memoirs of a Survivor** (1979) and the rest of the **Canopus in Argos** series, her own involvement with Sufism becomes evident in a sustained concern with the personal and collective unconsciousness. Black feminist writers, including Alice Walker, Ntozake Shange, Audre Iorde, and Toni Morrison have asserted and celebrated the survival of black women's spirituality **outside** orthodox religious systems whose sexism and racism have depended upon the mythical personification of a male, white God.

What I want to focus on here is the work of two contemporary British novelists, Sara Maitland and Michele Roberts, both of whom deal with tensions around female sexuality and spirituality. As feminists, they too reject a monolithic image of a prohibitive, patriarchal deity and move towards a more inclusive vision through an identification with women and female archetypes. Unlike Daly, however, their quest for a 'lost feminine' is located **inside** the spiritual traditions which formed them - Catholicism and Christianity - and an exclusively female/lesbian community such as Daly envisages is represented as a utopian solution to the crises, inner and outer, which their protagonists encounter.

Virgin Territory (1984) Maitland's latest novel,continues the intense questioning of female identity within a patriarchal/Christian social framework which informs her previous fiction, **Daughter of Jerusalem** and non-fiction, **A Map of the New Country.** It tells of Sister Anna, a young nun from South America, on a year's leave in London, researching into the lives of female saints and their disturbingly seductive masochistic patterns. Volunteering to care for Caro, a braindamaged infant girl, and tempted by a lesbian affair with a friend, Karen, Anna finds herself torn between a host of internalised voices. Her psyche is split between the polarised worlds of Caro, embodying darkness, chaos, instinct, unconscious: 'I like the dark. I have chosen the dark. Why should I come out and be made over by them,' and the Church Fathers, symbols of light, reason, social acceptance. They repudiate Caro as freakish and forbidden: 'She can offer only chaos. She is the name of insanity, of disintegration . . . let her go. She is the price we demand for our protection'.

Maitland's narrative works brilliantly through the many interlayered facets of Anna's psyche, arriving at no easy solution. Caro's darkness has to be accepted and integrated,

but also relinquished; Karen's lesbian community has to be recognised but rejected as unable to deal with Anna's spiritual complexities, whilst the Church remains too narrow to contain her. She is left with a difficult path into so unknown future: 'It is an enormous effort laying claim to new possibility. She has had to burrow deep inside her own silence and hug herself there, because there is nothing else . . . She is ready to go travelling; that is all'. Despite her consciousness, then, that the institutionalisation of Christian religion has atrophied many of its central truths, Maitland refuses to discard her faith utterly, detecting behind the petrified forms of **religion**, which she calls 'the organised, corporate expression of a series of beliefs', a more fluid **spirituality**, 'something more personal, an experience or sensation that can exist in almost any form and within any activity and without any dogmatic creed whatsoever', (3). The paradoxes surrounding her Christian faith and feminism provide a depth and complexity to Maitland's fiction which seem to me to be absent from the more unequivocal and inflexible radicalism of Mary Daly's polemic.

Michèle Roberts' three novels, **A Piece of the Night, The Visitation** and **The Wild Girl** are similarly concerned with women's relationship to spiritual values lying behind/within/beyond the religions which have ossified and turned against female autonomy and sexuality. The first two are quasi-autobiographical accounts of an emergent feminism in conflict with a Catholic upbringing, and their powerful depiction of spiritual and sexual drives at war with one another comes to a climax in **The Wild Girl.** Here, the very core of the Christian tradition is re-claimed for women, as Christ's life is re-told from the perspective of Mary Magdalene. Basing her narrative on the rediscovered Nag-Hammadi 'gnostic' gospels of Mary, Philip and the Apocryphon (Secret Book) of John, Roberts re-writes Christian history to extrapolate its female-centredness: she images a spirituality which does not militate against women and female desire, but regards them as crucial to attaining any integrity. Thus she has Christ speak these words of reprimand to a dismissive male disciple: 'So, Simon, be like Mary, for she is trying to join the male to the female inside herself, and to break down the boundaries between what is above and what is below, and what is inside and what is outside, and to become whole. How could she do this if she did not first know what is female, and what is below, and what is inside?'

Interestingly, Roberts was in Jungian analysis prior to the writing of **The Wild Girl,** and her symbol for the fullness of 'God' is a Jungian union of animus and anima figures in the unconscious - 'both expressed God: masculine and feminine, darkness and light' - developing the bond of male and female twins in the womb in **The Visitation** into a magnified, archetypal coming together of mythical male and female figures in Christ and Mary Magdalene. Despite some awkwardness at translating this myth into **literal** terms in the sexual mating of Christ and Mary, **The Wild**

Girl achieves a powerful image of psychic integration through the vision of animus-anima united at an unconscious level, as 'God'. 'You must remember that you can know God only when you know both parts of yourself and let them come together, the light of the Father married to the darkness of the Mother'. 'God', then is no longer externalised into a patriarchal body, but acknowledged as an internal presence:

> *'and so we testify to God inhabiting each of us and uniting us with each other and with the whole of creation. All of us, men and women alike, are the ovens and wine-skins of God, I tell my daughter, and we are God's walls, in which God kicks and swims like a fish.* ***There is no clear name for God, I tell her, since God is expressed in the movement and change of every tiny seed of being in the world.*** *(my stress)*

This is identical to Alice Walker's rejection of 'God', 'that old white man', in **The Colour Purple** (1983 and her comparable version of pantheism, celebrating 'god' in everything, but it also has its roots in centuries of female mysticism.

Not only outside the Christian tradition, but within it, 'God' as a restrictive and masculine concept has been undermined. As Elaine Pagels stresses in her radical revaluation **The Gnostic Gospels**, 'many gnostic Christians correlate their description of God in both masculine and feminine terms with a complementary description of human nature. Most often they refer to the creation account of Genesis 1, which suggests an equal or androgynous human creation'. Mediaval women mystics wrote explicitly and passionately of 'god' as something far greater than a narrow patriarchal 'God the Father'. Julian of Norwich, for example, speaks of 'god' as a feminised presence, non-authoritarian, non-conceptualised, non-capitalised, a spiritual function informing all things, as in Roberts and Walker, a manifestation of love. It is love in motion, female, often maternal and material - 'For such is love's command and **her** nature . . . love dwells so deep in the **womb** of the father. (4) The paradoxes in the writings of Julian of Norwich, Margery Kempe, and others can be read as attempts to make a **female** presence central to spiritual experience. Not only god, but Christ, becomes mother - 'only Christ has a sensual, that is human nature, perfected. He assumes the role of mother towards us as part of his divine workings' - 'he' is mother 'both spiritually and physically'.

Such ambiguities around 'god', 'mother', spirituality, have fascinating reverberations in relation to psychotherapy. If, as Jung claims, 'It is only though the psyche that we can establish that God acts upon us, but we are unable to distinguish whether God and the unconscious are two different entities. Both are border-line concepts for transcendental contents' (5), it is inevitable that boundaries between unconscious-psychic process and spiritual struggle become blurred, overlaid upon one another and often inseparable. Roberts, for example, has described all her writing as an attempt at reparation of the

mother, 'a yearning to be reunited with her'. In orthodox psychoanalytic terms, since desire for (re)-union with the mother, the primary love object, is seen as the predetermining factor in all human drives and relationships, any longing for union with an absolute, perfect love - emblematized in spiritual traditions as a divine Beloved, or 'God' - becomes a displacement of this primal longing. Such is Freud's atheistic heritage. Beyond 'god' lies the mother, and even Nirvana, the state of ultimate bliss and self-realisation, is reduced into a displaced death-wish.

From a less secular perspective, desire for the mother can be seen as another version of the desire for an absolute other, the longing for union with a supreme, unconditionally loving, love object. A quest for at-one-ness with the (biological or archetypal) mother then slides into a quest for at-one-ment with this (cosmic) other. Since the desire for the One is simultaneously the desire for the (m)other, it is hardly surprising that the metaphor of God as 'Mother' lies at the heart of so many spiritual traditions, **including** the (suppressed) history of Christian mysticism. Writing, like therapy, is one means of access to the unconscious, this area which Jung might want to associate with 'God', and what many women writers are now seeking is the healing implied by a restoration of all that orthodox/patriarchal concepts of 'God' (and the unconscious) have excluded - female as well as male, beyond god as well as god, body as well as spirit.

'Man corrupt everything, say Shug. He on your box of grits, in your head, and all over the radio. He try to make you think he everywhere. Soon as you think he everywhere, you think he God. But he ain't. Whenever you trying to pray, and man plop himself on the other end of it, tell him to git lost, say Shug. Conjure up flowers, wind, water, a big rock'.

(Alice Walker, ***The Color Purple****)*

Notes

1) Mary Daly, **The Church and the Second Sex** (New York, Harper and Row, 1968); Rosemary Radford ed., **Image of Women in the Jewish and Christian Traditions** (New York, Simon and Shuster, 1973); Elaine Pagels, 'What became of God the Mother?', **Signs**, Vol 2 (Winter, 1976); Julia O'Faolain and Lauro Martines (eds), **Not in God's Image** (Virago, 1979)

2) Carol P. Christ, **Diving Deep and Surfacing: Women Writers on Spiritual Quest** (Boston, Beacon Press, 1980) discusses Margaret Atwood, Doris Lessing, Adrienne Rich, Ntozake Shange from this perspective.

3) Jo Garcia and Sara Maitland (eds), **Walking on the Water: Women Talk About Spirituality** (Virago, 1983, p.4.

4) Mechthild of Magdeburg in K.M. Wilson (ed.) **Medieval Women Writers** (Manchester University Press, 1984), p.274. Katy Noakes has argued that the very language of Julian of Norwich and other women mystics refutes the 'reasoning' of male theologians with a much more open-ended kind of discourse which fuels rather than closes off desire and love.

5) C.G. Jung, **Psychology and Religion: West and East** Collected Works Vol 11, (Routledge and Kegan Paul) pp.468 onwards.

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