

This perception is encountered in more traditional, as well as in more enlightened, theologians.

Yet, it is romantically idealistic, if not spiritually perilous, to claim that a priest represents Christ or even all people. It is more humble to believe that the priesthood presents God to the people (as in the Old Testament) and the community to Christ (as in the New Testament). There are innumerable "ordained" ways of doing this. One of them is precisely the diaconate. It is similarly arrogant to claim that the priesthood is "not simply one of the ministries" – that is to say, "not only one vocation among many" – and that the priest somehow embraces "all vocations" and not just a "religious vocation," which all people have without any distinction whatsoever. So, certain theologians go as far as to claim that the priest has no ministry at all because he is somehow the term of reference for, and ultimate consummation of, all ministries. In my humble opinion, such claims are presumptuous, both opening up to diverse forms of abuse and alluding to yet a third challenge, to which we have already made reference.

3. One of the critical problems in our misunderstanding of the priesthood – and especially in our misconception of the diaconate in relation to its incorporation of women – is the confusion between priesthood (as inclusively embracing the ordained bishop, priest and deacon, but also the royal priesthood) and priest (as a distinct order of the ordained ministry). Unless we disabuse ourselves of this confusion – which only further advocates secular and unsacred authoritarianism – then we cannot really appreciate any of the three orders of priesthood.

Conclusion: Fulfilling a Vital Role

The diaconate could be expanded and enhanced to reflect a modern ministerial expression, even while being rooted in the historical apostolic experience. Perhaps deacons will gradually also awaken other ministries from their hardened roles and traditional expectations. A creative revival of the diaconate in our age could become the source of resurrection for the ordained ministry in general, thereby playing a crucial role in the mission of the Church. In this respect, the restoration of the diaconate may well prove both timely and vital.

CHAPTER FIVE

NAMING GOD IN ORTHODOX TRADITION: NEITHER MALE NOR FEMALE

EMMANUEL CLAPSIS

Abstract: While the Rhodes consultation unreservedly recommended that the Church study ways of reviving the ministry of the diaconess and, while it is true that women continue to be active in the life of the Church, a disheartening question still persists: Why has the Orthodox Church not yet studied or taken any concrete steps towards reinstating the ministry of deaconesses in faithfulness to its tradition and in conjunction with the pastoral challenges in the modern world?

The writer has chosen to focus on the nature and the meaning of theological language in Orthodox tradition. In order to respond to the critique of feminist theologians about the use of exclusively masculine language in naming God, he proceeds to carefully study the nature, function, and significance of religious language and names in patristic literature. He considers it important for the Church, in light of feminist critique and proposals, to rethink the nature of "God-talk."

From the patristic tradition the Greek Fathers' apophatic reflections on naming the divine, as well as analyzing God's many names in the biblical and ecclesiastical literature, and without neglecting the feminine images of God, the author came to the conclusion that no human concept, word, or image can circumscribe the divine reality, since they all have their origins in human language. Nor can any human concept express, with any measure of adequacy, the mystery of God, who is ineffable. The very incomprehensibility of God demands a proliferation of images and a variety of names, each of which acts as a corrective against the tendency of any one to become reified and literal.

Introduction

In 1985, the Orthodox Church, with the support of the World Council of Churches, convened in Rhodes (Greece), a Pan-Orthodox consultation on "The Place of the Woman in the Orthodox Church and the Question of

the Ordination of Women,¹ The consultation unreservedly recommended that the Church study ways of reviving the ministry of the deaconess and provide ample space for women to offer their particular gifts to the Church. Thirty years later, we still have another consultation, once again discussing the need to restore the ministry of the deaconess. While it is true that women continue to be active in the life of the Church, a disheartening question still persists: Why has the Orthodox Church not yet studied or taken any concrete steps towards reinstating the ministry of the deaconess, in faithfulness to its tradition and in conjunction with the pastoral challenges in the modern world? Personally, I wholeheartedly embrace and advocate the theological and historical arguments in support of reviving this particular ministry of women, not only as a token of historical faithfulness but also as a strong sign of inclusivity. However, this does not mean that we do not recognize the need to study the parameters of this revival with great sensitivity to the Church's unity. Currently, there is a need to study how to reinstate this particular ordained ministry in light of the pastoral challenges of the Church; a need to recognize the particular gifts that the Holy Spirit has bestowed upon women; and a need to uphold the Church's catholicity without putting her unity at risk.

In the present paper, I have chosen to discuss the nature and meaning of theological language in Orthodox tradition. Christian feminist theologians have noted that God is traditionally conceived as masculine, is addressed with masculine pronouns, and described by masculine images. They are upset by this and blame the male-dominated Church hierarchies and chauvinist attitudes of the Church's leading theologians down the centuries. Feminist theologians conceive as their task as the "new naming of self and world and, consequently, of the whole Christian tradition." They passionately raise the question of language and how it has been used in Christian tradition and strongly criticize the image of God as Father which, in their opinion, has been both absolutized by some and, in recent times, found to be meaningless by others.²

Feminist theologians have raised our awareness that the names, images and attributes by which Christians until very recently have referred to God can be "humanly oppressive and religious idolatrous". Language about God decisively influences the very understanding of what it means to be a human since human beings are created in God's image. They argue that the language used about God can be oppressive for women because its

¹ Istanbul, Turkey: The Ecumenical Patriarchate, 1988.

² Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology - Models of God in Religious Language*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982, p.145.

images, metaphors and concepts have been drawn almost exclusively from the world of ruling men. Such exclusive speech about God, in their view, serves in manifold ways to support an imaginative and structural world that excludes or subjugates women. It undermines the human dignity of women as equally created in the image of God. It is idolatrous because of its exclusive use of male language as the only fitting language to refer to God; it absolutizes a single set of images, metaphors and concepts and thus obscures the divine mystery, damaging the very truth of God's being. From a positive perspective, feminist theologians insist that, by using female images to refer to God, they do not only undermine the metaphysical supremacy and support of patriarchy, but also create the conditions for the formation of community characterized by relationships of mutuality and reciprocity, of love and justice.

The voices of the feminist theologians will not be silenced. On the contrary, they have become stronger, inviting churches to move beyond the patriarchal language, structures and practices that perpetuate the oppression and marginalization of women. The use of inclusive language has become a divisive issue within churches and in their relationships with each other. It is a contributing factor to the disunity of God's churches. Furthermore, the positive challenge that feminist theologians pose to churches can be seen as an opportunity to reflect on the renewal of theological language in the light of new global cultural realities, and in continuity with the living tradition of the Church.

How does the Orthodox Church respond to the critique of feminist theologians about the use of exclusive masculine language in naming God? There are two typical responses: the first is an outright rejection of the feminist project of more inclusive theological language, by rejecting the substitution of God the Father with a female goddess. The second is an appeal to the apophatic theology that leads, inevitably, to the affirmation that God is beyond gender and sexuality. For example, in their responses to questions about language and imagery regarding God, the Orthodox participants from the United States, in the study of the Faith and Order Commission on "The Community of Women and Men in the Church," stated: "We would never think of questioning that God was the Father, and could never conceive of God as Mother. Christ named God the Father; if we believe Christ, we cannot compromise."³ Yet, the Orthodox in France have stated: "The true meeting with God takes place beyond all images and all words, in the silence that is not speechlessness. This 'apophaticism'"

³ Melanie A. May, 'Conversations on Language and Imagery of God - Occasioned by the Community of Women and Men in the Church Study,' *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 40(1985) 15.

permeating Orthodox belief avoids the trap of a unilaterally masculine image of God. Orthodox iconography never represents God the Father. The divine paternity would not be represented by sexual image. The Heavenly Father should not be imagined as a bearded patriarch.⁴ The Godhead, according to Kallistos Ware, is in possession of neither masculinity nor femininity. He recognizes that “although our human sexual characteristics as male and female reflect, at the highest and truest, an aspect of divine life, yet there is in God no such thing as sexuality. When therefore, we speak of God as Father, we are speaking not literally but in symbols.”⁵ Based on this assumption, it could be argued that it is also possible to refer to God in feminine symbolic terms, since female characteristics “reflect at the highest and truest, an aspect of divine life.” He recognizes that Aphrahat, one of the early Syriac Fathers, speaks of the believer’s love for “God his Father and the Holy Spirit his Mother,” while in the medieval West we find Lady Julian of Norwich affirming: “God rejoices that he is our Father, and God rejoices that he is our Mother.” He considers these references to God as Mother to be exceptions in Christian tradition and concludes that “almost always the symbolism used of God by the Bible and the Church’s worship has been male symbolism.” He concludes with a short reflection on the “revealed and given” nature as well as the function of symbols in the Orthodox Church which, in his view, justify the prohibition on feminine symbolic language in referring to God.

We cannot prove by arguments why this should be so, yet it remains a fact of our Christian experience that God has set his seal upon certain symbols and not others. The symbols are not chosen by us but revealed and given. A symbol can be verified, lived, prayed – but not “proved” logically. These “given” symbols, however, while not capable of proof, are yet far from being arbitrary. Like the symbols in myth, literature, and art, our religious symbols reach deep into the hidden roots of being and cannot be altered without momentous consequences. If, for example, we were to start saying “Our Mother who art in heaven”, instead of “Our Father”, we should not merely be adjusting an incidental piece of imagery, but replacing Christianity with new kind of religion. A Mother Goddess is not the Lord of Christian Church.⁶

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way* (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1995), pp. 33.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

Such challenges compel us to study carefully the nature, function, and significance of religious language and names in patristic literature, in the hope that this study will help us respond creatively to this important issue.⁷ Regardless of whether we disagree or agree with such a statement, it is important for churches, in light of the feminist critique and proposals, to rethink the nature of “God-talk.”

Naming the Divine

Naming God was an issue of reflection for the Fathers of the Church. They believed that human wisdom, apart from divine revelation and without the guidance of the Holy Spirit, is incapable of understanding (and therefore of naming) the divine being. St. Gregory of Nazianzus, in his *Second Theological Oration*, recognizes the problem of religious knowledge and language.⁸ Responding to the Eunomian claim that the nature of God can be defined, he states:

To Know God is difficult, to speak of him impossible, as one of the Greek theologians taught – quite cleverly it seems to me: for in saying it is difficult, he appears to have comprehended him and yet escapes examination because of his inexpressibility: but in my opinion to speak of God is impossible and know him even more impossible. For what is known some word can perhaps make plain, if not adequately at least obscurely to anyone who has not completely lost his hearing or is mentally slow. But it is altogether impossible and impracticable mentally to encompass so great a subject, not merely for the indolent with lowly inclinations but even for those who aim high and love God — indeed for created nature in that this darkness and this thick fleshiness gets in the way of perceiving the Truth [...] (Orat. 28.4). It is not just the peace of God which passes understanding and knowledge [...] but his very nature which is beyond our grasp and comprehension. (Orat.28.5).

Asserting both the indescribability and the incomprehensibility of God, Gregory summarizes his position as follows:

⁷ Stylianos G. Papadopoulos, *Θεολογία και Γλώσσα*, Katerini: Parousia, 1977; Konstantinos Papapetros, *Η Ουσία της Θεολογίας*, Athens, 1970, pp. 43-64; Georgios Martzelos, *Η Ουσία και οι Ενέργειες του Θεού κατά τον Μέγαν Βασίλειον*, Thessaloniki, 1984.

⁸ Frances M. Young, “The God of the Greeks and the Nature of Religious Language,” in *Early Christian Literature and the Classical Intellectual Tradition* in honor of R. M. Grant, edited by William R. Schoedel and Robert L. Wilken, Paris: Éditions Beauchesne, 1979, pp. 45-74.

The Christian understanding of God, influenced by Judaism and Hellenistic philosophy, asserted the otherness of God through the use of apophatic language that primarily informs not what God is, but what God is not compared with created realities. Such language was and continues to be an important corrective to the highly anthropomorphic language that one finds in Scripture and Tradition, heightening the sense of God's mystery. Apophatic language denies the possibility of religious language and knowledge. This denial is partly philosophical: there is no logic common to ordinary language and language used for the divine. But is also partly religious: a God worthy of worship is beyond comparison with anything derivative from Him.⁹

In the Second Theological Oration of St. Gregory, we can find many of the apophatic terms by which Christian theological tradition defines what God is not, in its refutation of crude anthropomorphism. God is referred to as incorporeal (ἀσώματον) and therefore infinite (ἄπειρον), unlimited (ἀόριστον), without shape (ἀσχημάτιστον), untouchable (ἀναφής) and invisible (ἀόρατον); he is unbegotten (ἀγέννητον) without beginning (ἀναρχον), unchangeable (ἀναλλοίσιον), imperishable (ἄφθαρτον); he is the One who is "incomposite and incomparable by nature." But none of these negative terms, Gregory argues, tell us what he is in his being. These negative references to God that Gregory uses originate from the early apologists of the Church, who adopted the criticism of anthropomorphism produced by earlier Greek philosophy and the refined philosophical notion of God to whom worship should be offered.¹⁰

Despite the affirmation of God's indescribability and incomprehensibility, the Fathers of the Church found religious language to describe what they suggested was indescribable. St. Gregory of Nazianzus provides us with a clue by which we can understand this possibility. He asserts:

The divine cannot be named [...] For no one has ever breathed the whole air, nor has any mind located or language contained the Being of God completely. But sketching his inward self from his outward characteristics, we may assemble an inadequate, weak and partial picture. And the one

⁹ Greg. Naz., *Second Theological Oration*, 28.7.

¹⁰ As a result of adopting these two intellectual traditions, Christians were driven into a defensive position in respect of the anthropomorphisms of the Old Testament. Origen confronts this problem in his exegesis of the scripture, where he found it necessary to allegorize not only God's hands and face, but also his wrath and repentance – for emotions and change are alike foreign to the nature of God as Origen conceived him. He also faces the criticism and ridicule of the pagan, Celsus, for whom the biblical narratives made identified the Christian God with the Supreme Being incredible (*Contra Celsum* 4.13, 71,72).

who makes the best theologian is not the one who knows the whole truth, for the chain (of the flesh) is incapable of receiving the whole truth, but the one who creates the best picture, who assembles more of Truth's image or shadow, or whatever we should call it.¹¹

It is possible to speak about God based on limited knowledge of Him through His revelation and the incarnate Logos. The Logos of God was not simply identified with the incarnate person Jesus Christ, but with revelation in the word of scripture and in the works of creation. Scripture and tradition thus supplied possible names of God, all of which could be regarded as revealed by the Logos; and further attributes could be adopted from philosophy, since the best of philosophy was plagiarized from Moses and so was likewise derived from the revealing activity of the Logos.¹² Consequently, this makes the scriptural names of God foundational for the way that Christians have named the divine. What does scripture tell us about the deity? Dionysius the Areopagite states:

Many scripture writers will tell you that the divinity is not only invisible and incomprehensible, but also "unsearchable and inscrutable," since there is no trace for anyone who would reach through into the hidden depths of this infinity. And yet, on the other hand, the Good is not absolutely incommunicable to everything. By itself it generously reveals a firm, transcendent beam, granting enlightenments proportionate to each being, and thereby draws sacred minds upward to its permitted contemplation, to participation and to the state of becoming like it.¹³

This, according to St. Gregory of Nyssa, reflects the economy of the Holy Spirit who "has delivered to us divine mysteries and teaches the realities that are beyond discourse by means of those that are accessible...we are raised in an analogous way, through each one of the things said on the subject of God, towards a higher conception of him."¹⁴ The way that the authors of scripture named God, signifies their life of communion with God in their particular historical situation, as well as their illumination by God's grace that makes their human words about God the vehicle of God's self-revelation. St. Gregory of Nazianzus suggests that attaining knowledge of God is not a matter for philosophers, but for those who have purified themselves:

¹¹ *Second Theological Oration* 30.17.

¹² *Strom.* 2. 5. 20 ff; 4.14. 89ff.

¹³ *Ibid.*, Book 1, 1:2.

¹⁴ *PG* 45.761.

Not to everyone, my friends, does it belong to philosophize about God...but (only) on certain occasions, and before certain persons, and within certain limits. Not to all men, because it is permitted only to those who have been examined and are past masters in meditation, and who have been previously purified in soul and body, or at the very least are being purified. For the impure to touch the pure is not safe, just as it is unsafe to fix weak eyes upon the sun's rays. And what is the permitted occasion? It is when we are free from all external defilement or disturbance, and when that which rules within us is not confused with vexations or erring images.¹⁵

Thus, we must seriously consider in our theological endeavors the scriptural and patristic witness of God's relation with the world. We recognize in them a life of communion with God and therefore they become foundational for understanding and explicating the Christian faith. Recognizing, also, the fact that the language of Christian tradition is historically conditioned in its expression but not in its message, we must ask ourselves whether it is possible to express an understanding of God in a language other than the language of the scripture and of the Fathers, and continue to be in communion with the uninterrupted Christian tradition. If this is permissible, then we must struggle to develop criteria by which we expand the language that we use to refer to God, under the condition that such language does not reduce God to triviality but leads to a new understanding and appreciation of God's presence in the world.

God's Many Names

St. Gregory of Nyssa understands language to be a human creation. The existence of different languages is a clear indication that God allowed men the freedom to invent and develop linguistic expressions.¹⁶ This means that no human language is God-given, not even Hebrew.¹⁷ In reference to religious languages and the naming of God, St. Gregory recognizes the historicity of such language and asserts that the names of God are the work of human thought and conception. Such a view presupposes and is grounded upon the unreserved affirmation of God's transcendence. The recognition of human limitations in the understanding and naming of God leads him to accept that people have the right to use multiple words to name, in as much as their experiential understanding of God's active presence in their world is possible. He states:

¹⁵ *The First Theological Orations* 27.

¹⁶ *Contra Eunomium* 2. 200ff; 246-250; 284; 406.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 2. 260-61.

We allow ourselves the use of many diverse appellations in regards to him, adapting them to our point of view. For whereas no one suitable word has been found to express the divine nature, we address God by many names, each by some distinctive touch adding something fresh to our notion of him – thus reaching by a variety of nomenclature to gain some glimmerings for the comprehension of what we seek.¹⁸

In Christian tradition, the faithful refer to God with many names that reflect their limited understanding and experience of God's manifold graces and love toward the world.¹⁹

"While the divine nature is simple [...] and cannot be viewed under any form of complex formation, the human mind [...] in its inability to behold clearly the object of its search, feels after the unutterable Being in diverse and many-sided ways, and never chases the mystery in the light of one idea alone"²⁰ and "because in such cases there is no appropriate term to be found to mark the subject adequately, we are compelled by many and differing names [...] to divulge our surmises as they arise within us with regard to the deity."²¹

The names that God has assumed in Christian tradition are not arbitrary, but they signify God's relationship to the world as this has been experienced and understood by those anointed by the Holy Spirit. "We do not signify things said of God before having conceived them and we conceive them according to what His energies teach us about Him."²² An etymological investigation of the divine names can, at best, give us information on the thoughts by which people were led when they gave names to God. The anthropomorphic images by which people name God's relationship with the world cannot therefore be taken literally. They are figures of speech that do not fully correspond to or describe the divine reality, "for we have given names according to our own comprehension from our own attributes to those of God."²³ The names themselves are

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 2. 145.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 10,1. (PG 45.852): "But, as I am so taught by the inspired Scripture, I boldly affirm that He who is above every name has for us many names, receiving them in accordance with the variety of His gracious dealings with us, being called the Light when He disperses the gloom of ignorance, and the Life when He grants the boon of immortality, and the way when He guides us from error to the truth...and a physician and resurrection, and all the like, with reference to us, imparting Himself under various aspects by virtue of His benefits to us-ward."

²⁰ *Contra Eunomium*, 2. 475.

²¹ *Contra Eunomium*, 2. 577.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 269.

²³ *Theol. Orations* 5,22.

expressive of the experience of God's active presence in the world; their expression does not embody the essence of God.

For God is not an expression, neither hath He His essence in voice or utterance. But God is of Himself what also He is believed to be, but He is named, by those who call upon Him, not what He is essentially, but He receives His appellations from what are believed to be His operations in regard to our life.²⁴

The totalities of the many names by which we address God provide, by their own specificity, some glimmerings of God's glory. Despite the fact that the nature of God cannot be apprehended by human sense or reason, it is nonetheless possible for the human mind, aided by God's self-revelation, to know God, "to catch some faint glimpse of what it seeks to know."²⁵ We name God as we experience His love in this world. God's names primarily reveal the human understanding of his presence in the world. Yet, the naming of God is not arbitrary, but grounded in the prior existence and activity of God: "we do not say that the nature of things was a human invention but only their names."²⁶ The narrative of God's revelation as it is found in scripture and revealed through creation guarantees that the names of God are more than a figment of the imagination.

The theological language of the Fathers does not provide us with theoretical definitions of the being of God, in the sense of knowing the unknown through the known. Rather, their language is doxological in its basic structure. It expresses adoration of God on the basis of His works. In the adoring glorification of God, the worshiper focuses his or her attention entirely upon God, and that affects the use of language. In being used to praise God, words lose their ordinary sense. In the act of adoration, human words are transferred to the sublime infinity of God and are thus set in contrast to their ordinary meaning. For example, when we speak about God's righteousness in doxological statements, we release this word from the manipulation of our thoughts and we become receptive to a new understanding of "righteousness" based on the reality of God.²⁷ In the same manner and condition, the image of God as Father does not confine the being of God within the limits of this human image, but iconoclastically bursts that image and compels us to learn anew from Him

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p.265 (PG 45. 960).

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Contra Eunomium* 2.283; cf 2. 171; God is not a concept of mind.

²⁷ Edmund Schlink, *The Coming Christ and the Coming Church*, Philadelphia, 1968, pp. 16-84.

the truth about His fatherhood. It is a sacred duty to make use of God's names, privative of the things that are abhorrent to God's nature.

St. Gregory of Nyssa advocates that reflections on the nature of God should struggle to work out an Orthodox formula of thought, whereby a worthy conception of God may be ensured. In the process of fulfilling this task, we must always remember that Orthodoxy is not a thing of sounds and syllables, but of the mind and, therefore, particular notions and ideas. Consequently, names can be substituted or expressed by different words that convey to us the same significance. For example, it is possible to substitute the name of God as the first cause who is without cause by other names, such as Eternal Subsistence, The Cause of all, The Principle of all, The First Cause or The One alone without cause, all of which signify like manner and force the same notion.²⁸

All the human images and names by which we describe our understanding of God, according to Gregory of Nyssa, are metaphorical in nature. He asserts that all the names by which we refer to the deity are metaphors that express our understanding of God's benevolent relation with His creation. Gregory states that if someone were to reject the ordinary and natural sense of the word "Son," by which we learn that He is of the same essence as Him that begat Him, then he must transfer the name to some more divine interpretation.²⁹ Whether this has been done or is simply an oratorical refutation of Eunomius's ideas about the origins of language should not concern us at this time, but it is worth noting that Gregory does not exclude such a possibility.

In reference to the name of God as Father, Gregory indicates that by calling God the Father we name not what the unknown God is but how He relates to His incarnate Logos, Jesus Christ.³⁰ Furthermore, the title "Father" indicates the personal character of the first person of the Trinity, who must be always related to the second person of the Trinity, His Logos. From a Christological perspective, the fatherhood of God, and the sonship of His incarnate, Logos, indicate that the Son, Jesus Christ, is of the same nature as His Father. For this reason, St. Gregory believes that Jesus Christ passes over all those names by which the deity is indicated in the historical books, in Prophets and in the law. Jesus Christ delivers to us, as part of our profession of faith, the title of "Father" as better suited to indicate the truth, a title which, as has been said, in its relative sense connotes the Son.³¹ Yet Gregory of Nyssa would agree with Gregory of Nazianzus, who

²⁸ *Ibid.* 7.4 (PG 45. 760-761).

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.* 2,3 (PG 45. 473).

³¹ *Ibid.* 2,2 (PG 45. 468-469).

believed that God is beyond gender since He transcends the order of human generation, which is corporeal and includes gender:

For it does not follow that because the Son is the Son in some higher relation (inasmuch as we could not in any other way than this point out that He is of God and consubstantial), it would also be necessary to think that all the names of this lower world and of our kindred should be transferred to the Godhead. Or maybe you would consider our God to be male, according to the same argument, because He is called God the Father, and that deity is feminine, from the gender of the word, and Spirit neuter, because it has nothing to do with generation; but if you would be silly enough to say, with the old myths and fables, that God begot the Son by a marriage with His own will, we should be introduced to the hermaphroditic god of Marcion and Valentinus, who imagined these newfangled Aeons.³²

Gregory of Nazianzus has struggled to name God with different images and concepts other than the classic name of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. But, as he confesses, all these attempts have failed to find new images or illustration in order to describe the Trinitarian nature of God. In particular, he states:

I have very carefully considered this matter in my own mind, and have looked at it in every point of view, in order to find some illustration of this most important subject, but I have been unable to discover anything on earth with which to compare the nature of Godhead [...] For even if I did happen upon some tiny likeness, it escaped me for the most part, and left me down below with my example [...] Finally, then, it seems best to me to let the images and the shadows go, as being deceitful and very far short of the truth; and clinging myself to the more reverent conception, and resting upon few words using the guidance of the Holy Spirit, keeping to the end as my genuine comrade and companion the enlightenment which I have receive from him, and passing through this world to persuade all others also to the best of my powers to worship Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the one Godhead and power. To Him belongs all glory and honor and might forever and ever.³³

The fact that He could not find new images in order to describe the Godhead does not void the legitimacy of his efforts to find such images and names. The doctrinal activity of the first three centuries of the history of the Christian church had already brought into prominence several scriptural and non-scriptural images to illustrate the relation of the Son to

³² *The Fifth Theological Oration* 31.

³³ *Ibid.* 33.

the Father. The most important image is, of course, that of the Father and Son and Logos. The next most important scriptural images beside Father and Son and Logos are the icon (image or reflection) taken from 2 Corinthians 4:4 ("Christ who is the icon of God") and Colossians 1:15 ("He is the image of the invisible God"); ἀπαύλασμα (brightness, ray or reflection) taken from Hebrews 1:3; and character (impression or stamp) also taken from Hebrews 1:3. To these, however, Justin, Tertullian, and others have added at least three other images: the image of the stream descending from its source; that of the branch coming from the trunk or from the root; that of fire being lit from fire. Tertullian indeed elaborated these into a kind of analogy for the Trinity of Persons, using the image of source-streaming-river, and of sun-sunbeam-point of light to illustrate his doctrine of the Trinity. Gregory of Nyssa, himself, provides the following Trinitarian analogies: 1) Two of three different disciplines in the mind of a single man, e.g. medicine, philosophy, and similar arts; 2) The smell of myrrh mingling with the air in a room so they seem identical but are, in fact, distinct; 3) The light of the sun, the air and the wind mingling with each other, but still remaining separate;³⁴ 4) The analogy of two lamps being lit from a third;³⁵ and, if we attribute to him the 38th in the collection of Basil's Letters, we can add the image of the colors of the rainbow melting together yet remaining distinct, as an analogy for unity and distinction in the Trinity.

The Cappadocians were generally uneasy with all images designed to illustrate the relations of the Persons of the Trinity to each other, whether those images were scriptural, traditional, or modern. They were much more aware than their predecessors of the weakness of virtually all images, in that they imply a lapse of time or some sort of interval between the persons. For these reasons, they repeatedly emphasized the inadequacy of all images to describe the deity. Basil of Caesarea was vividly aware of the limitations of language about God: "All theological utterance," he wrote in one of his letters, "is less than the thought of him who speaks it, and less than the intention of him who is conducting the discussion, because language is somehow inadequate to represent our thoughts."³⁶ Elsewhere, he reminds his readers that the divine writers only speak of God in metaphors and symbolic language, and in images which are often contradictory when taken literally,³⁷ and that if we believe only in that

³⁴ *Adversus Arium et Sabellium: de Patre et Filio* 83.

³⁵ *Adversus Maced.* PG 45.1307.

³⁶ *Basil Letters*, VII. 44.

³⁷ *Nicene Post-Nicene Fathers II*, Michigan, 1954, vol. 5, 1.14 (PG 45. 300-301).

creaturely. Therefore, our attempt to express in human language something of the inexpressible mystery of God's transcendence is humble and limited in its capacities. The scriptural names of God are authoritative and indispensable for Christians, because the Church has recognized that these names reflect the life of communion that the scriptural authors had with God, through the guidance and inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

In Christian tradition, many names have been used which are not necessarily scriptural to refer to God's actions or ways of relating to the world.⁴⁰ Clement urges Christians to probe more deeply into the mysteries of divine love, where they will discover the intriguing fact that God is at once Father, Mother, and lover:

In his unspeakable greatness lies his fatherhood. In his fellowship with our experience is his motherhood. The Father takes a woman's nature in his love. It is in token of this that he begot the Son from his own being. The fruit born from love was love.⁴¹

When the Fathers thought of God, it was his overflowing goodness, mercy and love which they felt bound to celebrate. This is what is known through his acts and activities, even as he remains in himself a transcendent and mysterious being. They communicated this overflowing love by blowing up the highest ideals of human love. St. John Chrysostom, in the Homily on Ps 41, provides a beautiful illustration of the overflowing love of God:

God speaks of the love of birds for their young, the love of the fathers for their children, the tenderness of mothers, not because he only loves like a mother loves a child, but because we have no greater proofs of love than these examples.⁴²

⁴⁰ Recent research has been surfacing on the overlooked scriptural and extra-biblical female images of God. See especially Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, Philadelphia, 1978; Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, *The Divine Feminine: Biblical Imagery of God as Female*, New York, 1983. For patristic references on the same subject see: Kari Elisabeth Borresen, "L' Usage patristique de metaphores feminines dans le discours sur Dieu," *Revue Theologique de Louvain*, 13 (1982) 205-220; Scot Douglass, *Theology of the gap: Cappadocian language theory and the Trinitarian controversy*, New York: Peter Lang, 2005.

⁴¹ *Quis Dives Salvetur?* translated in R.B. Tollinton, Clement of Alexandria: A Study in Christian Liberalism, London, 1914, pp.319-320.

⁴² Ἐλληνες Πατέρες της Εκκλησίας, *Ἰωάννου Χρυσοστόμου Ἔργα*, v.5, p.596.

which can be fully expressed in words, then Christian faith and Christian hope have vanished.³⁸

From what we have studied, it is evident that the Cappadocians had a non-doctrinal and flexible attitude to formulae, since they were aware of the inadequacy and limitations of language in expressing propositions about God. They were more concerned with the doctrine expressed by language than the language itself. In the following passage, St. Gregory typifies this kind of flexibility:

Since then it is orthodox to believe that he who is the cause of everything does not himself have any underlying cause, once this has been firmly fixed in the mind, what further controversy about words does there remain for sensible men, because every word by which such a concept is expressed comes to the same thing? Whether you say he is beginning and origin of everything or declare that he is unoriginate or that he exists ingenerately or subsists from eternity or is the cause of everything or alone has no cause, all these expressions are virtually equivalent to each other as far as the force of the things signified goes and the words have the same value, and it is futile to dispute subtly about one kind of vocal utterance or another, as is orthodoxy consisted in syllables and sounds and not in meaning.³⁹

Feminine Images of God

Is it possible to describe or refer to God's relationship to the world through feminine images and names? From what we have discussed in this paper, the Fathers of the Church have built their theological reflection on the nature of God from the unreserved position of his total incomprehensibility and indescribability. Then, based on God's revelation, His manifold graces and, guided by the Holy Spirit, they proceed to reach a relative understanding of his energies that lead them to doxology. Those who had an immediate experience of God's love in their lives summarized and codified their perception in names. Since the experience of God's presence in history varies according to circumstances and times, God has been named with many names that reflect his manifold graces. This was necessary to communicate the faith event to others. Yet, it is important to remember that whether we speak about God in theology, or to God in praise and prayer, the tools at our disposal are unequal to the task. All the images, concepts and statements are inescapably human, finite, and

³⁸ *Ibid.* 2.24.

³⁹ *PG* 45.956.

St Gregory of Palamas, in his mystical understanding of God's salvific work in Jesus Christ, writes:

Christ has become our brother by union to our flesh and our blood [...] he has also become our father through the holy baptism which makes us like him, and he nurses us from his own breast as a mother, filled with tenderness.⁴³

St. John of Kronstandt, reflecting upon the beauty of nature as an expression of God's love, writes:

In how many ways does not God rejoice us, His creatures, even by flowers? Like a tender mother, in His eternal power and wisdom, He every summer creates for us, out of nothing, these most beautiful plants.⁴⁴

In these references the Fathers use feminine images and refer to God as mother. To say "God is mother" is not to identify God with mother, but to understand God in light of some of the characteristics associated with mothering, and simultaneously to affirm that God, in some significant and essential manner, is not a mother. The image of God as mother may be seen as a partial but perhaps illuminating way of speaking of certain aspects of God's relationship to the world. In a similar manner, to call God "Father" means that the unknown God becomes known and relates to us as Father of Jesus Christ and, by adoption, as our father. Any effort to take the concept of his "fatherhood" literally and define it from the ordinary understanding of fatherhood leads to Arianism and idolatry. Against Arianism, the Fathers of the Church (especially St. Athanasius and the Cappadocians) developed their theology of language, which is primarily apophatic and doxological, expressing the ecclesial experience of God's presence in the world and, more specifically, in the lives of the saints and of His Church. While the Fathers prefer to refer to God with scriptural language, especially the way that Jesus refers to Him, they are open to other non-scriptural and philosophical names, to the extent that these names refer to, represent and express scriptural truths about God. If God has many names that do not comprehensively or essentially describe His nature but which, instead, refer to His personal way of being and to His manifold graces toward creation, are there any feminine qualities or attributes that justify calling God "mother" that do not abandon the names

⁴³ Jean Meyndorff, *Introduction a l' etude de Gregoire Palama*, Paris, 1959, pp .247-48.

⁴⁴ *My Life in Christ*, Jordanville, New York, 1976, p. 27.

that He assumed and has been called in the formative Christian tradition? From this study, I have concluded that no human concept, word, or image can circumscribe the divine reality since they all have their origins in human language. Nor can any human concept express with any measure of adequacy the mystery of God, who is ineffable. The very incomprehensibility of God demands a proliferation of images and a variety of names, each of which acts as a corrective against the tendency of any one to become reified and literal.