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Speaking the Unspeakable: Nearly 1,500 Years of Christian Theology and Worship

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Item Type	Article
Authors	Bulkeley, Tim
Publisher	Asia Pacific Theological Seminary
Rights	With permission of the license/copyright holder
Download date	2026-07-10 21:23:02
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/236496

SPEAKING THE UNSPEAKABLE:
NEARLY 1,500 YEARS OF CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY
AND WORSHIP

By Tim Bulkeley

In the first of these five lectures, we stressed one of the basic but too often forgotten or ignored postulates of Christian theology—that God is alone and only, not a member with others of any class or group of beings. In Latin, God is *sui generis* or of his own kind. In terms of gender and sexuality, if God were either really "he" or "she" or "he and she," such a god would merely be part of this larger group of sexual or gendered beings. Although people may choose to imagine God as "he," God is beyond he-ness and she-ness, just as God is beyond every other category we can imagine.

We also talked about how this "being beyond" means that to speak of God using everyday language, we need to use pictures, otherwise we cannot approach speaking positively about God. The other way is the negative route—i.e., to talk about what God is not. God is not limited or God is not part of some group of beings. However, circling around God by saying what God is not leaves a sort of hole in the middle, which may satisfy philosophers and some systematic theologians but is not appropriate language for worship or preaching. For worship and preaching, we must use picture language. However, pictures are both powerful and dangerous.

In the second lecture, we explored some of the ways in which the Bible uses motherly language and pictures to describe God. Then in the third lecture, we moved on to consider how Jesus talked about God the Father and how that relates to the possibility of talking about God as motherly. It is quite striking that, in the New Testament, "Father" is used as a name for God with increasing frequency by the early Christians, so that it becomes one of their (and therefore our) favorite names for God. We also addressed the question of whether the fact that Jesus was male means that God is, in any sense, male.

If you find these ideas interesting or challenging, I want to reassure you that this kind of language was used by many of the most highly respected pastors and theologians of the Christian church for almost our first millennium and a half. For most of us, our institutional memory or church memory only goes back a few hundred years (thinking of the oldest worship songs and devotional books still in use.)

In this fourth lecture, we will examine some of the motherly language and pictures used by Christian thinkers, pastors, and theologians from the writing of the New Testament up until about 1400 AD. I will argue that Christian theologians and teachers have been happy to use motherly language and pictures to speak about God for the majority of church history. To decide the exact proportion of that period would require us to be sure of the time such usage ceased. In preparing my thesis, I found only a few uses between the early 1400s and the 20th century, so 1400 AD is the approximate date I am using. During those 1,400 years, talk of God as motherly was never common (except perhaps in Syrian baptismal services), but it was persistently present.

Early Syriac Christianity

Syriac is a Semitic language, a dialect of Aramaic, and close to the language that Jesus and the disciples spoke. Before the church spoke Greek and then Latin, the heart of Christianity was in Syriac-speaking areas. This usage has continued up to today in some parts of the world; but in the early centuries, there were three major languages for Christian writings—Syriac, Greek, and Latin.

In Syriac, the word "spirit" *ruah* is feminine. (Like Hebrew, Syriac has only two genders.) So, since "spirit" is a feminine word, when Syriac speakers are talking about the Holy Spirit, they have to talk about "her" as "she." I don't; I use English, so I talk about the Holy Spirit as "he" because "spirit" isn't feminine in English. But because it was in Syriac, Syriac speakers spoke of the Holy Spirit as "her." Thus, it was easier for them to picture the Spirit of God as motherly, for they were already calling "her" "she." (It is much easier to think of God as a mother if you are calling "her" "she." It is naturally more difficult if you are calling "him" "he.")

The early Syriac Christians did this frequently when they were talking about baptism, which should not surprise us since it marks and symbolizes our new birth. To be reborn implies the idea of a new mother. For the picture of being "born again" implies a mother to give

this birth. So when Syrian Orthodox and Maronite churches today take the words of their baptismal services from the very ancient liturgies, they sometimes speak of the "womb of the Spirit." This refers to the waters of baptism, for in baptism the Holy Spirit descends, fills us, and we are 'born again,' united in the death of Christ in the water. So the service reads like this:

Blessed are you, Lord God, through whose great and indescribable gift this water has been sanctified by the coming of your Holy Spirit so that it has become the womb of the Spirit that gives birth to the new man out of the old.¹

Or in a service attributed to Timothy:

Yea, we beseech you, Father of mercies and God of all comfort, send your living Spirit and sanctify this water, and may it become the womb of the Spirit that gives rebirth anew to mankind who are baptised in it.²

In the opening of the creation story in Genesis 1, there are several translation problems. In 1:2, a significant issue concerns the rendering of the verb *rahap*, which could mean, "sweep," "move," "beat," "brood," or "hover." We are not quite sure how to translate it. There is only one (or possibly two) other uses of this verb in Scripture—Deuteronomy 32:11 and Jeremiah 23:9. But these and the cognate languages use the verb in the context of birds, and most translations reflect this fact. In Syriac, the cognate word *rahep* is used in Gen 1:2 and means "brood,"³ which is the word one would use for a hen hatching her eggs. So as these early Syriac Christians read the creation story, they could hardly help but picture the Spirit of God as being like a mother hen.

How do we imagine being "born again?" It is a term commonly used in Evangelical circles and likely also among Pentecostals. (Certainly I heard the term used often during my visit to Asia Pacific Theological Seminary to describe the results of evangelistic activity.) But how is it pictured? Or has it become merely a dead metaphor? A dead metaphor is where picture language is used without any awareness

¹Sebastian P. Brock, *The Holy Spirit in the Syrian Baptismal Tradition*. Gorgias Press, 2008, 86.

²Ibid.

³Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15* (Word, 1987), 17.

of the picture. For instance, in everyday English, the phrase “You pig!” is used to describe someone who is greedy. That likely does not evoke an image of those delightful animals, which are kept to make into bacon, ham, and sausage; the word “pig” has simply added another meaning, except when someone revives the metaphor. For many modern Christians, the idea of being “born again” has become a dead metaphor, but perhaps it was still lively for Syriac Christians and perhaps could/should be revived today.

God Beyond Gender

Moving forward a century or so, it was already commonplace among Christian theologians (also in the Greek and Latin worlds) to claim that God was the One and Only, thus *sui generis* or beyond gender. In my previous lecture, two prominent examples were cited—Jerome and Eusebius, one Latin and the other Greek. Jerome was one of the great Bible translators of all time, the first to render the whole Scripture from Hebrew and Greek into Latin, and one of the most respected scholars of the early church. He noticed that in Latin *spiritus* was masculine while in Greek *pneuma* was neuter and in Syriac *ruah* was feminine. This was for him a reminder that gender categories do not apply to the transcendent God.⁴ For Jerome, this was already not something new but well-known, albeit sometimes forgotten. By contrast, Gregory of Nazianzus assumed that such a basic understanding (i.e., that the Godhead is not gendered) is a firm foundation for his arguments against various other heresies.⁵ Other influential Greek and Latin “fathers” also stressed this fact, sometimes citing Galatians 3:28 in support.⁶

⁴Jerome, *In Esaiam* (CCSL 73: 459, 1.82-83): “There is no sexuality in the Godhead;” in Latin, the quotation reads: *In divinitate enim nullus est sexus.*

⁵Gregory of Nazianzus, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2, 7, edited by Philip Schaff, “The Fifth Theological Oration: On the Holy Spirit,” VII, 643, makes fun of those who assume that human characteristics can be ascribed to God when he writes: “Or maybe you would consider our God to be a male, according to the same arguments, because he is called God and 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 begat the Son by a marriage with His own Will, we should be introduced to the Hermaphrodite god of Marcion and Valentinus who imagined these newfangled Eons.”

⁶For recent discussion of this, see Thomas Hopko, *Women and the Priesthood* (St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1999), especially the section “Patristic Views of Gender,” 173ff.; and Paul S. Fiddes, *Participating in God: A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 89-96.

God the Father as Mother

In addition to motherly language and imagery for the Spirit (the third person of the Trinity), while it may seem paradoxical, there was also a tradition of ascribing motherly language and characteristics to God the Father (the first person of the Trinity). Early on, one of the great teachers of the first few centuries of Christianity, Clement of Alexandria (an enthusiast who often used somewhat flowery language) wrote:

Behold the mysteries of love, and then you will have a vision of the bosom of the Father, whom the only-begotten God alone declared. God's very self is love, and for love's sake he became visible to us. And while the unspeakable part of Him is Father, the part that has sympathy with us is Mother. By his loving the father became of woman's nature, a great proof of which is He whom He begat from himself; and the fruit that is born of love is love.⁷

This translation is an old one and the thought patterns are Clement's, so we will exegete the passage. Clement is talking about the mysteries of God's love. He desires that his audience grasp this so that, when he says. . . . "the bosom of the Father," they feel they are being hugged by God. It is the only-begotten Son, Jesus, who reveals this to us. We don't see God the Father; however, some of us do see Jesus and can see the actions and hear the words of Jesus in the gospels. He is declaring the Father to us. Clement also says. . . . "God's very self is love," taking a clue from the Johannine writings, especially 1 John 1: 8, 16, which contain the words "God is love." Love is part of the nature of God, and part of what makes God God is the fact that God loves. God became visible in Jesus Christ because "he" loves us, and it is difficult to love someone you cannot see.

Having introduced this idea that God is invisible but also is love, Clement further says. . . . "the unspeakable part of him is Father;" that is, the part⁸ of God to whom we do not have direct access is the Father.

⁷Text from Otto Stahlin, *Clemens Alexandrinus*. (ed. Deutsche Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin, Leipzig: J.C. Hinrichs, 1905), 183 l. 31-184 l. 4; translation from *Clement, Clement of Alexandria* (ed. G.W. Butterworth; London / New York: W. Heinemann / G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1919), 347.

⁸Using everyday language and not the more careful formulation systematic theology would require.

The Father is the hidden part of God. This is interesting because in Graeco-Roman culture, it was mothers not fathers who were private and hidden. I think Clement recognizes this issue in what he next says. . . . ” The part of him that has sympathy with us is Mother.” Then, it is as if he says to himself, “I had better explain this to them, because we do not use mother language much in church and they may get shocked.” So he goes on to say. . . . “By his loving, the father became of woman's nature, a great proof of which is He whom He begat from himself.” Thus for Clement, the great proof that God is both father and mother is Jesus, since Jesus is begotten of God, and Clement has difficulty speaking about a birth without both a father and a mother. So Clement is talking about the Father as also being motherly.

In many of his writings, like the Bible writers, Clement mixes different pictures in order to get closer to the truth. He lives in a world of distant, respected fathers and intimate, loving mothers. "Father" helps us understand the distance and transcendence of God, while "mother" helps us understand that God as love. In my thesis and my little book, I give many more examples of patristic writers who speak of the Father as motherly, including St Augustine.⁹

The Motherly "Son"

We need now to move on because I want to make sure you understand that Christianity has had the habit of picturing each of the persons of the Trinity as being like a mother. For difficult as it may seem, the early church fathers also talked about the Son as mother. This thought is present in a number of the earlier writers including Clement,¹⁰ Chrysostom,¹¹ and later Augustine.¹² However, such talk reaches its peak with Anselm, the Archbishop of Canterbury and one of the best theologians of the early middle ages. Besides writing powerful systematic theology,¹³ Anselm also wrote prayers that were very

⁹Stephen Gilbert Timothy Bulkeley, “The Image of God and Parental Images: A Dialogue Between Theology and Psychology” (PhD, The University of Glasgow, 1981), 180-182, 190-191; and Tim Bulkeley, *Not Only a Father: Talk of God as Mother in the Bible and Christian Tradition* (Auckland, N.Z.: Archer Press, 2011), chap. 4, 53–70.

¹⁰See e.g. Clement, *Paedagogus* 1:6 “A hymn to Christ the Saviour” (ANF2: 296).

¹¹Migne, PG 58, 700. Chrysostom, *Hom. In Matth.* 76, 5.

¹²CC 40, 1431-1432; Augustine, *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, 101, 8. CC 36, 153; 165; 212; and Augustine, *In Iohannis Evangelium Tractatus*, 15:7; 16:2; 21.

¹³ Like the Monologion, which also contains discussion of the gender of the Godhead, Anselm, Jasper Hopkins, and Herbert Warren Richardson, *Anselm of Canterbury.: vol. 1. Monologion, Proslogion, Debate with Gaunilo, and Meditation on*

influential on later piety. In one of these, he begins by addressing St. Paul as he (Anselm) struggles with the knowledge of his own unworthiness to approach Jesus. He is aware that Jesus invites us, but he feels the gulf that his sinfulness creates separating him from God. (Remember, this was before Catholic piety began to circumvent the problem by approaching Jesus through Mary, his mother.)

Talking this problem out with St. Paul in his prayer, Anselm suddenly remembers that Paul describes himself (as did other apostles) as being like a mother to the churches he had founded.¹⁴ Then he recognises that if Paul was like a mother,¹⁵ Jesus is far more our mother because he suffered to give us "new birth." And further, if Jesus is like a mother, then Anselm really understands that he won't be turned away, for no mother will reject the child she bore.¹⁶

This thought that Jesus is like a mother because he suffers to give birth to us enabled Anselm to approach Christ. It also helped many others in succeeding centuries and was taken up by the great abbot, Bernard of Clairvaux, and from him entered as a regular part of medieval piety (especially Cistercian).¹⁷

What Anselm was doing in this prayer is in many ways very modern. For instance, many people living in the Philippines (I am told) find it difficult to approach Jesus directly. In Catholic circles, it is more common to approach Jesus' mother, Mary, and ask her to approach Jesus on their behalf. The feelings Anselm had of sinfulness, unworthiness, and the inability to approach a holy God are similar, yet his theological approach was very different.

The Catholic Church has "solved" the psychological problem by elevating Mary until she is something like a divine figure. And while Catholic dogma has been very careful to say she is not divine, nevertheless Catholic piety often acts as if she were. That move was a terrible mistake, for it minimizes the gulf that separates the human and the divine, making the Godhead something to be grasped (cf. Phil 2:6).

Human Redemption (London: SCM Press, 1974), 55-56 in which he reminds his readers "that there is no sexual distinction in the Supreme Spirit and the Word."

¹⁴Sometimes this involved birth-giving language (especially the verb *genao*), but often where they use milk-feeding imagery, which was a very common motif to speak of teaching in the Hellenistic world.

¹⁵E.g., Galatians 4:19; 1 Thessalonians 2:7-8.

¹⁶Anselm of Aosta, *Prayers and Meditations of St. Anselm with the Prosligion*, ed. Benedicta Ward (Penguin Classics, 1979), 358-371.

¹⁷See e.g. Caroline Walker Bynum, "Jesus as mother and abbot as mother: Some themes in twelfth-century Cistercian piety," *Harvard Theological Review*, 70, 1977, 257-284.

Anselm, because he was a great theologian, avoids that mistake by finding a way of thinking and talking about Jesus as mother. Thus, he does not need to approach Jesus' mother to talk to Jesus; he can go directly to Jesus himself. Psychologically, it is the same move (i.e., understanding that a divine mother figure cannot turn her child away); theologically, however, it is poles apart.

Trinitarian Motherly Theology

We need to again move on, for if we stop with Anselm, we risk not recognizing that this motherly understanding of the Godhead must be Trinitarian. As we have seen, theologians and pastors wrote of the Spirit as mother, of the Father as mother, and of the Son as mother. These three views were clearly put together at the end of the 14th and beginning of the 15th centuries by Julian of Norwich, who was a Christian mystic and an anchorite. (Anchorites cut themselves off from the world, not just in a monastery but completely, in order to serve and commune with God.) Living in a small room in the wall of a church, with people passing food in to her through a window, Julian's life was spent in prayer. As she prayed, she received a series of revelations about God. There are two versions of these revelations, and although it is not certain what their relationship is to each other, both seem to come directly from her rather than one having been edited by someone else. It is likely that the more complete version dates from the end of her life and fills out the earlier version. She titled her revelation "A Revelation of Love—in Sixteen Shewings," for it contains a meditation on the love of God. At the heart of her thinking about God, she uses motherly language and pictures.¹⁸

Julian was a good theologian, for she did not use motherly language and pictures only of one of the persons of the Trinity, thus sounding as if she was separating the Godhead into more male and more female persons. She is one of the first people (if not the first) to talk about each person of the Trinity as mother. Some of the earlier examples talked about the Father as motherly, some about the Son as motherly, and others of the Spirit as motherly, but they did not put these images together. In Julian, each of the persons is mother and the

¹⁸There are a number of editions and translations of Julian's work. This recent one includes both short and long texts; Nicholas Watson and Jacqueline Jenkins, *The Writings of Julian of Norwich: A Vision Showed to a Devout Woman and A Revelation of Love* (Penn State Press, 2006).

whole Trinity motherly. Thus, she avoids gendering God and uses motherly language about God without risking splitting the Godhead.¹⁹

There was a move among some liberal theologians a few decades ago to talk about the Spirit as mother.²⁰ Such identification of feminine or female characteristics with one person of the Trinity alone is extremely dangerous and commits more than one heresy. By talking of each of the persons and of the Trinity as a whole as mother, Julian avoids these problems.

Strange Unspeakability

For at least 1,400 years, orthodox and respected Christian theologians and pastors could talk about God using motherly language and pictures. The Bible writers also used such language. Yet fairly soon after Julian, such talk becomes strangely silent. (In my research, I only found one example between 1450 AD and the 20th century.) This raises a significant question. Why was motherly talk of God suddenly unspeakable?

There was no decision by a church council, no major book or lecture providing arguments against such talk, no evidence that the Church discovered such talk had been mistaken, and no theologian in that time condemned such talk. Yet the use of motherly language did cease. I am not certain of the answer, but it does seem significant that this was also the time when devotion to Mary became quite widespread in Western Christianity.²¹ Although there is no direct evidence that devotion to Mary replaced devotion to God as mother, the end of one form of devotion and the rise of the other are correlated and happened at the same period in the history of Western Christianity. The two are also related in that both offer a similar psychological benefit of a divine mother figure, making God more "approachable."

As I mentioned in an earlier lecture, there have been in recent years various highly respected Evangelical theologians who have

¹⁹Bulkeley, "The Image of God and Parental Images: A Dialogue Between Theology and Psychology," 202–208; and Bulkeley, *Not Only a Father*, chap. 4, 53–76.

²⁰See the discussion in Stanley James Grenz, *The Social God and the Relational Self: A Trinitarian Theology of the Imago Dei* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), chap. 7, especially around 291–293.

²¹For a brief history of the rise of devotion to Mary in the Catholic church, see David Lyle Jeffrey, "Hail Mary: Her moment of obedience triggered two millennia of reverence," in *Christian History* (2004) 83 <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ch/2004/issue83>. For a much fuller treatment, see Jaroslav Pelikan, *Mary Through the Centuries: Her Place in the History of Culture*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996.

written as if, at some point, the Church decided that it was wrong to talk about God as mother. However, this is not the case, and they provide no evidence beyond their own arguments that it ever has been or should be.²² Besides the lack of evidence of such language being condemned, it is also true that many of the most respected Christian theologians in the first 500 years, several in the second 500 years, and quite a few in third 500 years were satisfied to use motherly language and pictures to speak of God. They were never condemned.

C.S. Lewis, Elizabeth Achtemeier and others have argued against such language in the context of debates about the role of women in the ministry of their churches. It seems to me that their position on the issue of appropriate language for God is influenced by their positions on the question of women in ministry and not by solid theological underpinnings. C.S. Lewis, in particular, is a clear thinker and writer; but in this case, I believe his very clarity betrays his mistake. The Christian God is not gendered, is beyond gender, and Lewis and Achtemeier risk reducing God to being, in some way or sense, male. If men are more like God than women are, then God is part of the group "males." And if God were part of this group, then God would be like many other beings. Such a "god" would no longer be God (the One and Only) but merely a god. If this were so, we would effectively return to the worship of Ba'al and might expect to include Asherah alongside him, and then we would have our divine father and mother figures. That is why this topic matters. It is the danger of idolatry inherent in envisaging God as male that really matters.

From my perspective, the main strength of the positions from which Lewis and Achtemeier argue is their concern that our language about God should not endanger "his" transcendence. If God is not "wholly other," then God is not God. And yet they seem to forget that the reverse is also true. God revealed "himself" as radically immanent through "his" incarnation in Jesus Christ. So unless our talk and

²²C. S. Lewis, *Undeceptions: Essays on Theology and Ethics* (ed. Walter Hooper; London: Bles, 1971), 193; Elizabeth Achtemeier, "Female Language for God: Should the Church Adopt It?," *Transformation* 4, no. 2 (1987), 24-30; Elizabeth Achtemeier, "Why God Is Not Mother," *Christianity Today* 37, no. 9 (1993), 17-23; Elizabeth Achtemeier, "Exchanging God for 'No Gods': A Discussion of Female Language for God," in *Speaking the Christian God: the Holy Trinity and the Challenge of Feminism* (ed. Alvin F. Kimel; Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1992), 1-16; and Elizabeth Achtemeier, "Female Language for God: Should the Church Adopt It?," in *The Hermeneutical quest: essays in honor of James Luther Mays on his sixty-fifth birthday* (ed. James Mays; Allison Park, PA: Pickwick Publications, 1986), 97-114. See also other authors collected in Alvin F. Kimel, *Speaking the Christian God: the Holy Trinity and the Challenge of Feminism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992).

picturing of God also expresses this immanence (at the same time as expressing the divine transcendence), then equally God is not God. As so often when we are presented with two extreme positions, both are wrong!

Notice that I am not asking that you reach the same conclusions I do, but rather that you consider the evidence and arguments and begin to draw your own conclusions. This issue is significant for two reasons. Firstly, if we get it wrong, we risk devaluing God from "the One and Only" to merely "a god"; and secondly, if we get it wrong, we make approaching God and experiencing 'his' love more difficult for many people. Both reasons are of such central importance that we ought not to remain uncommitted on this matter.

There are a number of theologians from the liberal end of Christianity who have thought and written extensively about this issue, but I cannot accept many of their conclusions. We need people from the Evangelical and Pentecostal end of the Christian spectrum to begin thinking about this matter, so that we can avoid worshipping a god who is merely male and avoid making it difficult for people who have had bad or absent fathers or who are/were very close to their mothers to approach and experience God to the full. Nothing is more important than these two things.

Conclusion

For most of the first one and a half millennia of Christianity, many of the most prominent theologians and pastors had no problem using motherly language and pictures to speak about God. And they used such language to describe each of the persons of the Triune Godhead. There was no decision taken at any council, nor did any theologian write a major work denouncing such talk. Yet around the time that Mary began to occupy a more central place in Catholic spirituality and theology, talk of God as motherly declined and disappeared until rather recently. This has allowed the growing of dangerous misunderstandings that God is, in some sense, more male or masculine.

Putting it positively, if we take up some of the ways in which the Bible and the theologians of the first 1,400 years of Christianity used motherly language and pictures to speak of God, we can again find ways to speak this otherwise unspeakable image of God. This can enrich our spirituality and deepen the ways in which we approach God. It can open us up to experiencing God in new ways, as such language did for 1,400 years. (We will return to this notion in the final lecture.)