Globethics Repository



God Language

This page was generated automatically upon download from the Globethics Repository. More information on Globethics see https://www.globethics.net. Data and content policy of Globethics Repository see https://repository.globethics.net/pages/policy.

Item Type	Article
Authors	Moșoiu, Nicolae
Publisher	International Journal of Orthodox Theology
Rights	Creative Commons Copyright (CC 2.5)
Download date	2026-11-20 01:36:09
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/164243

urn:nbn:de:0276-2016-2049

Nicolae Moșoiu

God Language. An Orthodox Perspective on Feminist Theology

Abstract

In this presentation I will deal with the issue of God Language, making references to two main authors: Professor Elizabeth Johnson and Father Professor Emmanuel Clapsis. To overcome men's exclusive ownership of God Language, female and male metaphors need to be employed, and finally, we have to use a transgenic language or a gender-transcendent language and concept of God. Maternal metaphors are to be found in the Holy Scripture, e.g.: Ps. 109 (110):3; Mt.23:37 and Gal. 4:19. Although in the countries where the vast majority of the population is Orthodox, the Feminist Theology is



Rev. Assoc. Prof. Dr. Nicolae Moşoiu, Assoc. Professor of Dogmatic Theology at the Faculty of Orthodox Theology „Andrei Şaguna" of the "Lucian Blaga" University Sibiu, Romania

almost non-existent, theologians must be proactive to avoid a possible future crisis. I would like to underline that, although it is important to use, in our theological texts, both female and male metaphors when we speak about God, the issue of God language (or the so-called inclusive language) must not be confused or used as a justification for the ordination of women, which represents an entirely different issue.

Keywords

theological language, androcentrism, maternal metaphors, feminist theology, Αγία Σοφία ("Holy Wisdom")

1 Introduction

Ancient Greeks used to have a method to analyze words that Plato called *ὀρθοτες των ὀνομάτων*, which later came to be known as *etymology.* This term was, however, only coined later by the Stoics, when *ὀρθοτες* was already ancient; it can even be found in Homer's works. "Etymology" is composed of *εθυμος* – true, real, authentic and *λογος* – word; it, therefore, means genuine. Etymology is the science which deals with words and their genuine derivation[1].

The problem of language – and that of terminology implicitly – started to appear during the philosophical debates in a central position only during the last century when neo-positivists and, later, analysts, together with structuralists and hermeneutics claimed that the primary objective of philosophical search is neither being, nor knowledge, but language. A philosopher's

[1] Anton Dumitriu, *Eseuri. Ştiintă şi cunoaştere. Aletheia. Cartea întâlnirilor admirabile,* (Bucureşti, Editura Eminescu,1986), p.320.

primary goal is, therefore, not to discover the roots of being or truth, *but the meanings of words*[2].

God language has been and remains a crucial issue. Christian tradition, from early on, insisted that human beings cannot penetrate the mystery of God. All the prominent theologians affirmed that no word or concept derived from creaturely reality could provide a complete, essential description of who God is[3]. It is in this sense that God was thought to be incomprehensible.

This theological view is also consistent with scriptural testimony which did not assign gender to the divine being. At the same time, Christian theology and Christian art have created images of God that are predominantly masculine[4].

Victoria S. Harrison states that an increasing number of people have begun to agree that Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, with their sacred texts and theological traditions, are essentially patriarchal. Many theologians now agree „that androcentric religious anthropologies have shaped the three Abrahamic monotheisms in ways that make them especially problematic for women"[5].

---

2 Battista Mondin, *Sistemul filosofic al lui Toma d 'Aquino. Pentru o lectură actuală a filosofiei tomiste*, (București, Galaxia Gutenberg, 2006), p.123.

3 Augustine, *Sermo* 52, c. 6, n. 16, PL 38:360; Saint Gregory of Nyssa, *Against Eunomius*, in *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church* (ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1893), p. 69; Aquinas, *In Boethius de Trinitate* 1, 2, Questions 1-4, translated by Rose E. Brennan, S.H.N. (Herder, 1946) (http://www.dhspriory.org/thomas/BoethiusDeTr.htm).

4 Wioleta Polinska, In Woman's Image: An Iconography for God", (Feminist Theology 13, (September 2004): (40-61), p. 41 (http://fth.sagepub.com/content/13/1/40).

5 Victoria S. Harrison, "Representing the Divine: Feminism and Religious Anthropology", (Feminist Theology 16, 2007), pp. 125-142, p.128 (http://fth.sagepub.com/content/16/1/128).

Rosemary Radford Ruether considers that: "the traditional Christian view of God is androcentric; that is, God is identified as a male, although remnants of a secondary female manifestation of God never fully disappear. This means that maleness is seen as more godlike than femaleness. Male-female duality is assimilated into the metaphysical dualism of mind and body. Femaleness is linked to sex, body and mortality and so alien to God who is sexless, disembodied and immortal. All males are not equally godlike, although any male is more godlike than any woman. However, those males who are most godlike are the sex-denying males of the intellectual, ecclesial ruling class"[6].

Although Saint Gregory of Nyssa claimed that we can never arrive at a "full comprehension of the divine essence" but that we can learn something about God from "His works, and from the names which express His power"[7], a masculine image of God is advanced by the artistic icons deeply inscribed in our common psyche. Images such as Michelangelo's *The Creation of Adam* (in the Sistine Chapel), or William Blake's *God Creating the Universe* depict God as an old, white-haired, bearded man

---

6 Rosemary Radford Ruether, "The Politics of God in the Christian Tradition", (Feminist Theology 17, (May, 2009), pp. 329-338, p.332. "The article details five patterns that shape the way in which God language in Christianity influences social and political systems: androcentrism or male domination over women; anthropocentrism or human domination over nature; ethnocentrism or the domination of a 'chosen' people over other people; militarism, and asceticism or the dualism and hierarchy of mind over body. It also suggests how these patterns of domination can be dismantled and more mutual relations between God, humans and nature developed", p. 329 (http://fth.sagepub.com/content/17/3/329).

7 Saint Gregory of Nyssa, Saint Gregory of Nyssa, *Against Eunomius*, in *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church* (ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1893), pp. 257, 260.

and serve as a potent source of the visualization of God[8]. The same problem is with the anthropomorphic and zoomorphic icon of the Holy Trinity.

To overcome men's exclusive ownership of God-language, female and male metaphors need to be employed, and finally, we have to use a transgenic language[9] or a gender-transcendent language and concept of God[10].

Maternal metaphors are to be found in the Holy Scripture, e.g.: Ps. 109 (110):3; Mt. 23:37 and Gal. 4:19:

"*I have begotten Thee from my womb before the morning*" (*ἐκ γαστρὸς πρὸ ἑωσφόρου ἐγέννησά σε; ex utero ante luciferum genui Te"* (Ps. 109/110:3).

"Jerusalem, Jerusalem, … how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing" (Matt. 23,37; Luke 13,34).

"*My little children, with whom I am again in travail until Christ be formed in you – τεκνία μου, οὓς πάλιν ὠδίνω μέχρις οὗ μορφωθῇ Χριστὸς ἐν ὑμῖν*; filioli mei, quos iterum parturio, donec formetur Christus in vobis" (Gal. 4:19).

The disappearance of any discrimination is obvious in Gal. 3:28: *"There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male* (*ἄρσεν*, masculus*) or female* (*θῆλυ*, femina)*; for you are all one in (πάντες γὰρ ὑμεῖς εἷς ἐστε ἐν*) *Christ Jesus".*

As early as the second century, Clement of Alexandria spoke of both Christ and God the Father in motherly metaphors. The picture that Clement paints is that of a Christian who feeds on

---

8 Wioleta Polinska, In Woman's Image: An Iconography for God", (Feminist Theology 13, (September 2004), pp. 40-61, p. 42 (http://fth.sagepub.com/content/13/1/40).

9 Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), p. 67.

10 Esther McIntosh, "The Possibility of a Gender-Transcendent God: Taking Macmurray Forward", (Feminist Theology 15, January, 2007), pp. 236-255.

the nourishing breasts of Christ, the mother. The source of the milk, however, is God the Father, who in this way functions for Clement as an ultimate mother[11].The example of Clement's feminine symbols for God is not isolated. Works of prominent theologians from Clement, Origen, Saint Irenaeus to Saint John Chrysostom, Saint Ambrose and Augustine refer to Christ as a mother[12].

Furthermore, Syriac tradition (before the fourth century) abounded in images of the Holy Spirit as the mother. One of the most popular metaphors evokes Spirit as the womb that delivers true sons and daughters of God[13]. Occasionally, God the Father, as well as the Son, are presented as nursing mothers[14].

Saint Dionysius the Areopagite, in *The Mystical Theology* (&5) writes:

> "Again, ascending yet higher, we maintain that He is neither soul nor intellect (…), nor is He spirit (*πνεῦμα*) according to our understanding, nor filiation (*υίοτες*), nor paternity (*πατρότες*); nor anything else known to us; transcends all affirmation, and the simple pre-eminence of His absolute nature is outside of every negation — free from every limitation and beyond them all"[15].

Father Dumitru Stăniloae translated into Romanian the complete works of Saint Dionysius the Areopagite. In a note referring to the above-quoted text ("nor is He Spirit"), the famous Romanian theologian wrote, "It is more audacious

---

11 Verna E. F. Harrison, "The Care-Banishing Breast of the Father: Feminine Images of the Divine in Clement of Alexandria's *Paedagogus* I", (Studia Patristica 31 (1997), pp. 400-412, pp. 401-405.

12 Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982), p. 126.

13 Susan Ashbrook Harvey, Feminine Imagery for the Divine: The Holy Spirit, the Odes of Solomon, and Early Syriac Tradition, (St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly, 37 (1993), pp. 111-139, pp.119-120, 123.

14 Ibidem, pp. 125-127.

15 http://www.esotericarchives.com/oracle/dionys1.htm.

(daring) to be told that God is not Spirit or Father or Son as we think about"[16].

It is important to underline that in the Orthodox teaching we speak about *Theotokology*, not simply about *Mariology*, hence the right balance in anthropology, Christology and soteriology. In the West, "by the twelfth century, however, Christian art and architecture give more attention to Mary than to the Son.

In fact, at least among the uneducated, the Virgin becomes the most prominent figure in their faith. This was a result of a growing devotion to the Mother of God as the emphasis on her office of 'Mediatrix' intensifies/d. She is understood to be a mediator between the Father and the Son, whose intercession is the source of all mercy and all answered prayers. Titles such as 'Queen of Heaven,' 'Ruler of the World', or 'Queen of Mercies' are common names showered on Mary. This newly acquired status is reflected in the iconography of Mary, who now appears seated on the throne with Christ.

In a twelfth-century sculpture, Mary and Christ are shown in the double roles of the bridegroom/bride and King/Queen. In a medieval painting by Agnolo Gaddi, not only does the mother share the power with Christ, but she also mirrors the image of Christ in a fashion of God the Father in other works. In addition to the attributes of Christ, other Trinitarian titles are transferred to Mary"[17].

---

16 Sfântul Dionisie Areopagitul, *Opere complete,* (București: Paideia, 1996), p. 256.

17 Wioleta Polinska, In Woman's Image: An Iconography for God", (Feminist Theology 13, (September 2004), pp. 40-61, p. 51 (http://fth.sagepub.com/content/13/1/40).

2 Professor Elizabeth Johnson's critique

Professor Johnson's[18] best-known work is entitled: *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*[19], for which she became the fourth recipient of the University of Louisville and Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary Grawemeyer Award in 1993. It was the first extended attempt to integrate feminist categories such as experience and emancipation into classical Catholic theology[20].
Professor Johnson was criticized[21] for her statements, but I think it is necessary to refer to her work when we approach the theme of terminology. Johnson states that the patriarchal traditions have failed to respect the non-literal character of religious language. Furthermore "the masculinity of God is

---

18 See: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elizabeth_Johnson_(theologian) Elizabeth A. Johnson (born December 6, 1941) is a Christian feminist theologian. She is a Distinguished Professor of Theology at Fordham University, a Jesuit institution in New York City. She is a member of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Brentwood. Johnson received her B.S. from Brentwood College in 1964, an M.A. from Manhattan College in 1964 and a Ph.D. in theology in 1981. She taught science and religion at elementary and high school level, then taught theology at St. Joseph's College (New York) and at Catholic University before moving to Fordham in 1991. She has served a head of the Catholic Theological Society of America and the American Theological Society. She was one of the first female theologians church authorities allowed to receive a doctorate (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elizabeth_Johnson_(theologian)

19 Elizabeth Johnson, She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse, New York: Crossroad, 1995.

20 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elizabeth_Johnson_(theologian)

21 In 2011, the Committee on Doctrine of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops issued a statement saying that *Quest for the Living God* "does not recognise divine revelation as the standard for Catholic theology" and "differs from authentic Catholic teaching on essential points". http://cnsblog.wordpress.com/2011/10/28/response-from-sister-elizabeth-johnson-to-us-bishops-committee-on-doctrines-latest-statement/.

exacerbated within the Christian tradition by the significance commonly accorded to the gender of Christ"[22].

"What androcentric anthropology already holds as a basic assumption, Christology confirms: men are not only more truly theomorphic but, in virtue of their sex, also christomorphic in a way that goes beyond what is possible for women"[23].

Professor Johnson is right about the confusion between the maleness of Christ and God the Father, but she is wrong about the process of *christomorphization* which is not an exclusive one, but it is for all human beings.

Regarding the first issue, it is worth mentioning that in the *Creed* is used the word "*ἐνανθρωπήσαντα*" (from *ανθρωπος,* not from *ανηρ,* man!), but, as we know, the maleness of Jesus Christ is about Adam, the first human being. Jesus Christ is the "last Adam" (*ὁ ἔσχατος Ἀδὰμ*)(1Cor 15:46), the One who recapitulated us all, He is our *Κεφαλη*, not the first Adam (cf.Ephes.1:10: "*ἀνακεφαλαιώσασθαι τὰ πάντα ἐν τῷ Χριστῷ*") : "*,The first man Adam became a living being'; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit - Ἐγένετο ὁ πρῶτος ἄνθρωπος Ἀδὰμ εἰς ψυχὴν ζῶσαν ὁ ἔσχατος Ἀδὰμ εἰς πνεῦμα ζῳοποιοῦν*"(1Cor 15:46). However, this does not mean that the Christology can be "androcentric"![24].

Concerning Johnson's idea, above - quoted, that "men are more truly (…) christomorphic than women", it is important to underline that a common idea in the Christian spirituality is that Christ has to take human *form* (Philip. 2:6: "*ἐν μορφῇ θεοῦ ὑπάρχων* (…) *μορφὴν δούλου λαβών*"), to be formed in us (Gal. 4:19: "*μορφωθῇ Χριστὸς ἐν ὑμῖν*") in order to make the *life in*

---

22 Victoria S. Harrison, "Representing the Divine: Feminism and Religious Anthropology", (Feminist Theology 16 (2007), pp. 125-142, p. 140 (http://fth.sagepub.com/content/16/1/128).

23 Elisabeth Johnson, *She Who is*, pp. 152-153.

24 Idem, "Jesus, the Wisdom of God: A Biblical Basis for Non-Androcentric Christology", (Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses LX 1:4 (December, 1985), pp. 261-294.

Christ possible for all: women and men. The discrimination is excluded in Gal.4:19 (Saint Paul is addressing all his spiritual children), especially as the metaphor is based on human intrauterine development and suggests that Christ has to reach maturity in all the human beings, and since the exclusion of discrimination is evident in the same Pauline epistle (Gal.3:28).
Furthermore, Father Professor Vasile Mihoc identifies in this Pauline text, the third aspect of the maternal metaphor (after the love and the care for them), the painful process of birth: "Christ's *formation* in us is a slow and continuous process in which the Apostle has an irreplaceable role. Saint Paul said that he suffers «again» the pain of birth «until Christ be *formed* in you»"[25].
The verb *μορφόυσθαι* (the mediopassive form of *μορφόω*) means "to be modeled," "to receive a predetermined *form*". The expression *μέχρις ου,* found in Gal 4:19, indicates not only the moment of completion of this process of spiritual growth, but its duration and continuity as well, and therefore we can translate this expression in *as long as*"[26]. It is worth mentioning here that the bishop wears the engolpion (ἐγκόλπιον) with the icon of the *Θεοτοκος,* as a sign that, similarly to Saint Paul, he also has to be "*in travail*", in order to make possible the regeneration (new birth) from water and Spirit, through the Holy Mystery /Mysterion of Baptism.
It is important in this context to quote Saint Gregory of Nyssa: "Christ made the Church His body and through the adding of those who are saved the Church is built in love, until all of us will become perfect, at the measure of the fulfilled age of Christ

---

[25] Vasile Mihoc, *Epistola Sfântului Pavel către Galateni*, (Bucureşti:Editura Institutului Biblic şi de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române,1983), p.170.

[26] *Ibidem*. About the theme of *christomorphism* see: Nicolae Moşoiu, "Towards a deeper understanding of the Ordo of the Holy *Mysterion* of Baptism", in the 2nd I.A.O.D.T. volume: *Tradition and Dogma: What kind of Dogmatic Theology do we propose for nowadays*, (Arad: Editura Universităţii „Aurel Vlaicu", (2009), pp. 153-202.

(Eph 4:13). If, therefore, the Church is the body (σῶμα) of Christ, and Head (*Κεφαλή*) of the body is Christ, Who forms (*μορφόν*) the face of the Church (*τῆς ἐκκλησίας τὸ πρόσωπόν*) with His aspect (*τῷ ἰδίῳ χαρακτῆρι*), the hearts of the friends of the Groom, looking upon this, were stolen (they fell in love – *ἐκαρδίοθεισαν*), for now they see clearer the Unseen One"[27]. It means that the Church (i.e. the newly baptized and the saints – women and men, the first Christians were called saints) has (have) the same beauty, i.e. garment of light, as Christ has.

Johnson's opinion, as Leslie Liptay[28] highlighted, is that the masculine symbol of God functions: (1) against women by justifying androcentrism and reinforcing patriarchy, (2) against the image of God by compromising the incomprehensibility of God[29]. A comparison of the many ancient scriptural metaphors for the divine being and their selective use today suggests devolution of God-language in the Christian tradition since its origins. There are many male Biblical metaphors for God: Father, lord, king**,** landowner, slave master, leader of armies, shepherd; but also female ones**:** Mother, baker woman, female householder, mother bear or hen**,** midwife. However, despite this evidence, contemporary liturgical titles by which God is addressed: "Father, all-powerful and ever-living God", "God, our loving Father", "Lord our God", "Almighty and everlasting Lord", have virtually no equivalent female titles for God**.**

Ironically, there seem to have been more female references to God extant in early Judaism and Christianity than there are in evidence in the tradition more than two thousand years later,

---

27 Saint Gregory of Nyssa, *Canticum Canticorum, Hom*.8, vol. VI, Jaeger edition, (edited by H. Langerbeck, Leiden 1962).

28 Leslie Liptay, *The Christology of Elizabeth Johnson as a Resource for Church Renewal* . A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Regis College and the Theology Department of the Toronto School of Theology Master of Arts in Theology awarded by the University of St. Michael's College, 1997 (https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/bitstream/1807/10515/1/mq25201.pdf).

29 Ibidem, p. 4.

prompting the Christian feminist call for inclusive, non-gendered and sex-equivalent God-language. Moreover, of the multitude of divine images the Church claims as its heritage, what has survived as the most fitting description of and oft-used reference to God, is that of a male ruler of the family and society, hence, "Father" and "Lord". Indeed, the Scriptures show that Christ himself sanctioned this image when he instructed his disciples to "*Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect*" (Mt 5, 48) and taught them to pray the Lord's Prayer (Mt 6, 9; Lk 11, 2)[30].

In church practice, however, the father metaphor has so usurped traditional speech about God that the image of the nameless one has been essentially reduced to that of a heavenly patriarch in the Christian imagination. Thus what Johnson refers to the "single, reified metaphor of the ruling man now largely defines the Christian God lexicon: "Father" and "Lord" being the inherited products of a two-thousand-year search to name the divine being. However because the search has been biased, the product is false, with results that are both unjust for women and untrue of God, ruling to *androcentrism*, *patriarchy, and idolatry*[31].

For example, the influence of androcentrism on the Western world is seen in the way that "male" qualities of intellect and reason have been valued historically, while "female" qualities of emotions and bodies have been devalued.

This point was first and perhaps best expressed by Mary Daly in her famous phrase: "*When God is male, the male is God*"[32]. However, as E. Mcintoch noticed: "the logical form of this statement is invalid, and I suspect that, in practice, the situation

---

30 Ibidem, pp. 7-8.

31 Ibidem, p. 9.

32 Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father* (Boston: Beacon, 1973), p.19 (http://www.feministes-radicales.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/11/Mary-Daly-Beyond-God-the-Father-Toward-a-Philosophy-of-Womens-Liberation.pdf).

is the other way around. It is not the maleness of God that leads to patriarchy, rather, as Daly herself suggests, patriarchal systems stress male supremacy in their divinities. This is not to deny, however, as feminist scholars have attested, that the construction of a male God legitimizes the suppression of women"[33].

After the presentation of these issues, Johnson suggests the reconstruction of Christology: "Jesus-Sophia". The Wisdom Tradition is evident in the Hebrew Scriptures. According to Johnson, "there is no other personification of such depth and magnitude in the entire Scriptures of Israel (than Wisdom)"[34]. Her comment is the noteworthy give the fact that Wisdom is a female figure.

Not only is the word of feminine origin in both Hebrew, *Hokmah*, and Greek, *Sophia*, but Wisdom is consistently female in the Hebrew Scriptures, appearing alternatively as: *sister, mother, female beloved, chef and hostess, teacher, preacher, and maker of justice*. [l] Not only is she able to rule out the possibility that references to Wisdom were intended for a second deity but she shows a "functional equivalence" between

---

33 Esther McIntosh, "The Possibility of a Gender-Transcendent God: Taking Macmurray Forward", (Feminist Theology 15 (January, 2007), pp. 236-255, p. 237; see also: Elisabeth A. Johnson, "Female Symbols for God. The Apophatic Tradition and Social Justice", (International Journal of Orthodox Theology 1:2, (2010), pp. 40-57, p. 42: "naming God almost exclusively in the image of a powerful ruling man has at least three pernicious effects. 1) By literalising this image, it reduces the living God to something much less, indeed, to an idol. 2) It legitimates structures of male authority in civil and ecclesial communities: in the name of the Father God who rules over all, men have the duty to command and control, on earth as it is in heaven. 3) It robs women of their dignity by distancing their human nature made in the image and likeness of God from their own concrete, bodily identity"; (http://orthodox-theology.com/media/PDF/IJOT2-2010/7-johnson-femalesymbols.pdf).

34 Elizabeth Johnson, *Wisdom Was Made Flesh and Pitched Her Tent Among Us*, (New York: Paulist Press, 1993), p. 46.

the words and deeds of Sophia and Yahweh (Job 28:12-28; Prov 8:35; 8:15; 3, 19; Wis 7:22, 8:6; 7:12;7:27; Sir 24:23). Only God is so hidden and elusive, a being who cannot be found by human efforts (Job 28:12-28).

Only God can claim to give life: "*Whoever finds me finds life*" (Prov 8:35); only God can claim to order and guide: "*By me kings reign, and rulers decree what is just*" (Prov 8:15); only God can claim to create: "*The Lord by wisdom founded the earth*" (Prov 3, 19); she is the "*fashioner of all things*" (Wis *7:22,* 8:6) and "mother" of all good things (Wis 7:12); only God can claim to save: according to the book of Solomon, Wisdom is responsible for leading her people out from a nation of oppressors through the deep waters of the Red Sea; and only God can claim to pervade all things: by entering souls and making them friends of God (Wis7:27), and pitching her tent among human beings (Sir 24:23).

Because claims which can only be made of God are here made of Sophia, Johnson concludes that these passages were intended as descriptions of God in God's manifestation of Sophia. Thus, "There can be a distinction but no separation between this figure and Israel's God"[35]. "She is the personification of God's self-coming toward the world, dwelling in it, active for its well-being". Wisdom in the Hebrew Scriptures is simply God**.**

In conclusion, for Johnson: "Sophia is not YHWH, understood in the specificity of that name**,** but both female Sophia and male YHWH express the one God who promises life upon being found"[36].

Furthermore, according to Johnson, the wisdom of God was one of the titles used by the first-century Christians in an attempt to express their experience of the saving power of Jesus, along with the more familiar**,** Son of God**,** Son of Man, *Logos*, and

---

35 Elizabeth Jonshon, Jesus, the Wisdom of God: A Biblical Basis for Non-Androcentric Christology", (Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses LX 1:4 (December, 1985), pp. 261-294.

36 Ibidem, p. 275.

Messiah. The identification of Jesus with Sophia underwent an intense period of development from the early identification of Jesus as the child or envoy of Sophia (in the Gospel of Luke) to the insight that this identification was the reason behind the incarnation.
Johnson refers to passages from Saints Paul, Matthew, and John as well as a current exegesis on these texts to develop her argument (1Cor.1:24; Col 1:15; 1Cor 8:6). Thus, Johnson's conclusion that "What Judaism said of Sophia, Christian hymn makers and epistle writers now came to say about Jesus"[37].

3 Wisdom Christology in the Christian Scriptures

According to Johnson, the wisdom of God was one of the titles used by the first-century Christians in an attempt to express their experience of the saving power of Jesus, along with the more familiar**,** Son of God**,** Son of Man, *Logos*, and Messiah. The identification of Jesus with Sophia underwent an intense period of development from the early identification of Jesus as the child or envoy of Sophia (in the Gospel of Luke) to the insight that this identification was the reason behind the incarnation. Johnson refers to passages from Paul, Matthew and John as well as a current exegesis on these texts to develop her argument (1Cor1:24, Col 1:15); 1Cor 8:6). Thus, Johnson's conclusion that "What Judaism said of Sophia, Christian hymn makers and epistle writers now came to Say about Jesus[38].
Further, Johnson shows how Matthew extended the identification of Jesus with Sophia by having Jesus speak her words, and do her deeds. The Matthew passages where Jesus is

---

37 Idem, "Redeeming the Name of Christ", in: Catherine Mowry Lacugna (ed), *Freeing Theology: The Essential of Theology in Feminist Perspective*, (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1993), pp. 101-128, p. 121.
38 Ibidem.

considered to be quoting Sophia are: 11:28-30 where Jesus calls out to the heavily burdened to come to Him to find rest (a direct borrowing from Sirach 6: 23-31); as well as the "Lament over Jerusalem" (Mt 23:37-39) in which Jesus depicts himself as a hen brooding over the people's rejection of the prophets before withdrawing like Sophia from the city that rejects him; and Mt 11:25-28 in which Jesus shares His intimate knowledge of "Abba" to the little ones, as Sophia does with God (8:4).

Finally, Johnson considers John's gospel to be the "fullest flowering of Wisdom Christology"[39] with respect to the wisdom themes which run throughout, themes of "seeking and finding, feeding and nourishing, revealing and enlightening, giving life, making people friends of God, shining as light in the darkness, being the way, the truth and the life."

Most importantly, for both the development of subsequent theology and the identification of Jesus and Sophia in the Christian scriptures is the prolog which presents the pre-history of Jesus as the story of Sophia. Jesus is portrayed as the one who was with God in the beginning and the one through whom God made all things.

According to Johnson and several scripture scholars, "the Prolog was originally an early Christian hymn to Wisdom which at its climax identifies her with Jesus Christ. (…) The use of the wisdom trajectory in the Christian scriptures had profound theological implications for the development of Christology since Jesus came to be seen as God is only begotten Son after he was identified with Wisdom"[40].

Johnson argues that Jesus is Sophia-Incarnate and was considered as such by the late first century, by referring to the fact that of the various biblical symbols used of Jesus – Son of God, Son of Man, Logos, and Messiah - Wisdom alone is able to relate Jesus ontologically with God because she alone connotes divinity in its original context.

---

39 Ibidem, p.103.
40 Ibidem, p.106.

According to the feminist theory then, the fact that Wisdom Christology did not prevail is not surprising. Because it did not support the firmly established patriarchal and androcentric culture which has virtually always dominated the Western world, it lost its hold. "Jesus- Sophia" might be understood as a pure revelatory moment, a unique part of the Christian past. Although largely ignored or unnoticed, it survives in the memory of the church, a single precedent which was never given opportunity to be a lived reality. It survives as a fact of the early church, ready to be revived as a symbol of reform[41].
Reference are also made to Mt.11:28-30; Mt 23:37-39; John's Gospel being the "fullest flowering of Wisdom Christology"[42]. The conclusion is that the Wisdom Christology did not prevail because it did not support the firmly established patriarchal and androcentric culture which has virtually always dominated the Western world. "Jesus- Sophia" "might be understood as a pure revelatory moment, a unique part of the Christian past. Although largely ignored or unnoticed, it survives in the memory of the Church, a single precedent which was never given opportunity to be a lived reality. It survives as a fact of the early church, ready to be revived as a symbol of reform"[43].
Personified representations of Holy Wisdom (Αγία Σοφία) or "Wisdom of God" among the Eastern Orthodox refer to the

---

41 See also: http://uwspace.uwaterloo.ca/bitstream/10012/5131/1/Loewen_MSusanne.pdf

42 Leslie Liptay, *The Christology of Elizabeth Johnson as a Resource for Church Renewal* .A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Regis College and the Theology Department of the Toronto School of Theology Master of Arts in Theology awarded by the University of St. Michael's College, 1997, p. 43, (https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/bitstream/1807/10515/1/mq25201.pdf).

43 Ibidem, p.52. See also: M. Susanne Guenther Loewen, *Jesus Christ as Woman Wisdom: Feminist Wisdom Christology, Mystery, and Christ's Body,* on: http://uwspace.uwaterloo.ca/bitstream/10012/5131/1/Loewen_MSusanne.pdf.

Person of Jesus Christ, as illustrated in the Acts of the Seventh Ecumenical Council:

> "Our Lord Jesus Christ, our true God, the self-existent Wisdom of God the Father, Who manifested Himself in the flesh, and by His great and divine dispensation (lit., economy) freed us from the snares of idolatry, clothing Himself in our nature, restored it through the cooperation of the Spirit"[44].

More recently, it has been stated that from the most ancient times and onwards many Orthodox countries have been consecrating churches to the Lord Jesus Christ as the Wisdom of God. Orthodox icons and cathedrals with names often translated as "Saint Sophia" do exist, but they do not refer to a specific individual, human or divine, named "Sophia". Rather, they are a mistranslation of Αγία Σοφία, or "Holy Wisdom", which is a convention used in the Orthodox Church to refer to Christ[45].

4 Father Professor Emmanuel Clapsis' edifying response to the feminist critique [46]

> "Today, certain fundamental concepts of traditional Christian faith have been challenged and language, including the use of names, has become one of the most controversial issues in Christian theology. Particularly, feminist theology conceives its task as a new naming of self and world and, consequently, of the whole Christian Tradition"[47].

---

44 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sophiology.

45 Ibidem.

46 Special references in this section are to: Emmanuel Clapsis, *Orthodoxy in Conversation*, (& Naming of God: An Orthodox View, pp. 40-56, (Geneva: WCC Publication, (2000); about the author see: http://www.hchc.edu/academics/holycross_faculty/clapsis/.

47 Ibidem, p. 40.

Father Clapsis highlights that Saint Gregory of Nyssa declared that God does not use or sanctify one particular form of language. „In fact, even the biblical language which is attributed to God in the book of Genesis is not God's talk, but that of Moses, who uses the language in which he had been educated and which people could understand, to communicate realities of profound and divine significance"[48].

Concerning the nature of language, Emmanuel Clapsis underlined that, according to the Cappadocian Fathers, human language is the intention of human intellect. They emphasized that God creates the world i.e. the substance of all things, while human beings have given names to them which reflect the kind of relationships they have developed with God's creation. Thus the human words signifying our conception of a subject are not to be substantially identified with that thing itself[49]. Then Fr. Clapsis quotes Saint Gregory of Nyssa:

> "For the things remain in themselves as they naturally are, while the mind, touching on existing things, reveals its thoughts by such words as are available. *Moreover, just as the essence of Peter was not changed with the change of his name, so neither is any other of the things we contemplate changed in the process of mutation of names*"[50].

Consequently, it is impossible to find any appropriate human term „to describe divine realities, and therefore we are compelled to use many and different names to divulge our surmises as they arise within us about the Deity"[51].

Concerning the name of God as Father, Fr. E. Clapsis refers to Saint Gregory of Nyssa who indicates that by calling God "The

---

48 Ibidem, p. 43.

49 Ibidem, p. 42.

50 Saint Gregory of Nyssa, *Answer to Eunomius II,* in *Nicene Post- Nicene Fathers II,* (Michigan: Grand Rapids, Eerdmans: 1954), vol. 5, p.196 (PG 45.760).

51 Ibidem, p. 308, (PG 45.1104).

Father" we name not what the unknown God is but how He relates to His incarnate Logos, Jesus Christ[52]. Furthermore the title „Father" indicates the personal character of the first Person of the Trinity, who must always be related to the second Person of the Trinity, his Logos; and also that the Son is of the same nature as his Father. Saint Gregory of Nyssa would agree with Saint Gregory of Constantinople that God is beyond gender since he transcends the order of human generation which, being corporeal, includes gender:

> "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 hermaphrodite god of Marcion and Valentinus, who imagined these newfangled Aeons"[53] .

It is very interesting that Saint Gregory of Constantinople has struggled to name God with images and concepts other than the classic names of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. However, as he confesses, all these attempts have failed to find new images or illustrations to describe the Trinitarian nature of God[54].

It is also evident that the Cappadocians had an undoctrinaire and flexible attitude to verbal formulae; aware of the inadequacy and limitations of language in expressing propositions about God, *they were more concerned with the doctrine expressed by language than with the language itself* [55].

---

52 E. Clapsis, *Orthodoxy in Conversation,* p. 50.

53 Saint Gregory of Nazianzus, *The Fifth Theological Oration – On the Spirit* (*Discourse* 31), *apud* E. Clapsis, p. 51.

54 Saint Gregory of Nazianzus, *Fifth Theological Oration*, 33. *apud* E. Clapsis, p. 51.

55 *Nicene Fathers II,* Michigan, 1954, vol.5, p.263 (PG 45.956), *apud* E. Clapsis, p. 51.

Concerning the *feminine images of God*, Fr. Clapsis asks if it is possible to describe or refer to God's relationship to the world through feminine images and names? 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 Scripture, Jesus of Nazareth refers to his unity with God through the concept of fatherhood, but already in the New Testament other images are also used; and many names which are not necessarily scriptural have been used in Christian Tradition to refer to God's actions or ways of relating to the world[56]. In some instances, feminine metaphors were used to describe aspects of God's being and action. Jesus in the following passage adopts a provocatively maternal image for Himself and His feelings:

> *"Jerusalem, Jerusalem,* (*…*) *how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing"*(Mt. 23,37; Lk. 13,34).

Fr. Clapsis also offers other patristic references. Clement urges the Christian to probe more deeply into the mysteries of divine love where he will discover the intriguing fact that *God is at once Father, Mother, and Lover*[57].

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

---

[56] Recent research surfaced the overlooked scriptural and extra-biblical female images of God; see esp. Phyllis Treble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality,*(Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978); Virginia Ramsey Mollenkott, *The Divine Feminine: Biblical Imagery of God as Female,* (New York:Crossroad,1983); for patristic references on the same subject see: Karl Elisabeth Borressen, "L usage patristique de metaphores feminines dans le discours sur Dieu", (Revue theologique de Louvain, 13 (1982), pp. 2015-2220.

[57] R. B. Tollinton, *Clement of Alexandria*: *A Study in Christian Liberalism*, 2 vols. (*London*: Williams& Norgate, 1914), pp. 319-320.

> "Christ has become our *brother* by the 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 breast as a mother, filled with tenderness*"[58].

Saint John of Kronstadt, reflecting upon the beauty of nature as an expression of God's love, writes:

> "In how many ways does not God rejoice us, his creation, 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"[59].

In these references, underlines Fr.Clapsis, the Fathers use feminine or maternal images and refer to God as a mother not in a literal but in a metaphorical sense. To say that "God is mother" is not to identify "God and Mother", but to understand God in the 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 a mother may be seen as a partial, but perhaps an illuminating way of speaking of certain aspects of God's relationship to the world. In a similar manner, to call God as Father means that the unknown God becomes known and relates to us as Father of Jesus Christ and, by adoption, as our Father; but any effort to take the concept of his "fatherhood" literally and to define it from the ordinary understanding of fatherhood leads to Arianism and idolatry.

Therefore the Fathers of the Church 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 the Church.

---

58 Jean Meyendorff, *Introduction a l 'etudede Gregoire Palama,*(Paris: Seuil, 1959), pp. 247-428.

59 Saint John of Kronstadt, *My Life in Christ*, (New York: Jordanville, 1976), p. 27.

Father Clapsis concludes that "no human concept, word or image- each of which originates in the experience of created reality – can circumscribe the divine reality; nor can any human construct 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 particular one to become reified and literal"[60].

5 Final remarks

1. Generally speaking, the feminist critique of patriarchal and androcentric God-language in the Christian tradition is legitimate; hence the necessity of a genuine gender-transcendence in God - language.
2. The Orthodox theologians can no more ignore the problem of the language. The Feminist Theology is a big challenge indeed, but it should not be the only reason for the right approach to terminology. The importance of *Theotokology versus* Mariology must be underlined.
3. Father E.Clapsis' article I referred to above is an example of what we call contextual theology. It is one of the rare appropriate responses to a major contemporary issue, from the part of Orthodox theologians.
4. Father Dumitru Stăniloae was also aware of the difficulty of expressing the way in which God can be named and known: "Any thought regarding God must have a fragility, transparency, a lack of fixedness, it must urge us to revoke it while stimulating towards another, but on the same line. If the meaning is fixed in our mind, we limit God within these borders or even forget God and our whole attention goes on that particular meaning or that particular word which defines Him. In this case, 'meaning' turns

60 E. Clapsis, *Orthodoxy in Conversation,* p. 54.

into 'Idol,' that is a false god. Meaning or words must always make God transparent, as unfitting in it, going beyond any meaning, stressing one aspect at a time of the infinite richness"[61]. Moreover, for Father Stăniloae, a saint (of both genders) has maternal qualities: self-giving, personal sacrifice, forbearance, kindness, fragility, delicacy, tenderness, peace and inner quiet, humbleness, and love[62].

5. As it was already underlined in the introduction, the issue of God language (or the so-called inclusive language) must not be confused or used as a foundation for the ordination of women, which represents an entirely different issue.

6. Although in the countries where the vast majority of the population is Orthodox, the Feminist Theology is almost non-existent, theologians must be proactive to avoid a possible future crisis (which means *judgment* in Greek).

---

61 Dumitru Stăniloae, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, vol. I (Bucuresti, Editura Institutului Biblic şi de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, 2003), p. 126.

62 Ibidem, pp. 278-285.