

Bess Brooks

She Who Is ... Invisible? A Glimpse of the Mothering God in the Church of England's Eucharistic Prayers

Abstract

This article contends that, when we think of regimes of (in)visibility, we should begin with God and, specifically, how we describe God in public worship. The essay highlights the invisibility of female aspects of God in the current Church of England (CofE) Eucharistic Prayers. There is a single reference to God as mother in Prayer G and the author argues that the inclusion of this reference is characterised by defeminisation: that is, the masculine aspect of something dominates to the extent that the female aspect cannot manifest. The author suggests that defeminisation occurs at three levels: in the historic dominance of the Father metaphor as a way of describing God, in the lack of value placed on feminist scholarship in the CofE General Synod debates about Prayer G, and in the inadequacy of the mother reference itself. The mother God, as depicted in Prayer G, does not feed her children, unlike the father God in Prayers B, E, and F. The author suggests that future revisions of CofE Eucharistic Prayers should increase the visibility of female aspects of God. The article is set within the overall context of Gail Ramshaw's hermeneutical approach to liturgy, YES-NO-YES, and her concept of liturgy as primary speech.

Keywords: Defeminisation; mother God; eucharistic prayer; feminist; liturgy; Church of England.

Resumen

Este artículo sostiene que, cuando pensamos en regímenes de (in)visibilidad, deberíamos comenzar por Dios y, específicamente, por cómo describimos a Dios en el culto público. El ensayo resalta la invisibilidad de aspectos femeninos de Dios en las oraciones de eucaristía de la actual Iglesia de Inglaterra (CofE). Hay una sola referencia a Dios como madre en la Oración G (Prayer G) y la autora discute que la inclusión de esta referencia es caracterizada por la desfeminización: es decir, el aspecto masculino domina hasta tal punto que el aspecto femenino no puede manifestarse. La autora sugiere que la desfeminización ocurre en tres niveles: en el dominio histórico de la metáfora del Padre como forma de describir a Dios, en la falta de valor dado a debates del Sínodo General de la CofE sobre la Oración G en la investigación feminista y en la inadecuación de la referencia a la madre en sí. La madre Dios, tal y como se la

describe en la Oración G, no alimenta a sus hijos, contrariamente al padre Dios en las Oraciones B, E y F. La autora sugiere que futuras revisiones de las Oraciones de Eucaristía de la CofE deberían incrementar la visibilidad de aspectos femeninos de Dios. El artículo se ubica en el contexto general de la aproximación hermenéutica de Gail Ramshaw a la liturgia, SÍ-NO-SÍ y su concepto de liturgia como diálogo primario.

Palabras clave: Defeminización; madre Dios; oración eucarística; feminista; liturgia; Iglesia Anglicana.

Zusammenfassung

Dieser Artikel macht geltend, dass wir, wenn wir an herrschende Systeme von (Un-)Sichtbarkeit denken, mit Gott beginnen sollten und besonders daran, wie wir Gott in öffentlichen Gottesdienst beschreiben. The Beitrag hebt die Unsichtbarkeit der weiblichen Aspekte Gottes in den gegenwärtigen Eucharistischen Gebeten der Church of England (CofE) hervor. Es gibt einen einzigen Bezug auf Gott als Mutter im Gebet G und die Autorin argumentiert, dass die Einbeziehung dieses Bezugs von De-Feminisierung gekennzeichnet ist, d. h. der männliche Aspekt von etwas dominiert so sehr, dass der weibliche Aspekt nicht sichtbar werden kann. Die Autorin weist darauf hin, dass De-Feminisierung auf drei Ebenen stattfindet: in der historischen Dominanz der Vatermetapher als eine Weise Gott zu beschreiben, in der fehlenden Wertschätzung der feministischen Forschung in den Debatten der CofE-Generalsynode über Gebet G und in der Unangemessenheit des Bezugs auf die Mutter selbst. Die Mutter Gott, so wie sie im Gebet G dargestellt wird, nährt nicht ihre Kinder, anders als der Vater Gott in den Gebeten B, E und F. Die Autorin schlägt vor, dass zukünftige Revisionen von Eucharistischen Gebeten der CofE die Sichtbarkeit der weiblichen Aspekte Gottes verstärken sollten. Der Artikel ist im größeren Kontext von Gail Ramshaws hermeneutischem Zugang zur Liturgie, JA-NEIN-JA, und in ihrem Konzept von Liturgie als ursprünglicher Sprache verortet.

Schlagwörter: Entweiblichung; Mutter Gott; eucharistisches Gebet; feministisch; Liturgie; Kirche von England.

Introduction

“Liturgical language is [...] the essential and primary [Christian] speech,” according to the liturgical scholar Gail Ramshaw.¹ “[It is] the basic language

¹ Gail Ramshaw, *Liturgical Language: Keeping It Metaphoric, Making It Inclusive* (Liturgical Press: Collegeville and Minnesota 1996), American Essays in Liturgy, 5.

from which all other speech flows in exposition and reflection and to which, when Sunday comes around again, all Christian talk returns.”²

What happens if key facets of God, so far as we can understand and describe them, are not visible in the liturgical language with which the people of God engage on Sunday morning? How does this relate to the theme of the ESWTR conference in Leuven, September 2019, “Gender, Race, Religion: De/constructing Regimes of In/visibility”? I suggest that the issue of invisibility “starts at the top.” It is present in the reduced visibility of any female aspect of God in the current Church of England (CofE) liturgy – that is to say, in the eight Eucharistic Prayers published as Order One of Common Worship (CW) in 2000, and labelled A to H. Specifically, there is only one explicit reference to God as a mother (as opposed to a father) in all the eight Prayers – and that is in Prayer G. Yet CW was published after several decades of feminist scholarship in this area. What factor(s) might have contributed to this state of affairs?

I attempt to answer this question by looking at three separate, but related, issues. Firstly, I briefly look at some of the feminist scholarship on metaphors and models for God in the two to three decades before the publication of CW. I particularly consider the dominance of the father metaphor, to the exclusion of the mother one. Secondly, I look at the process by which Prayer G became part of the Eucharistic Prayers of the CofE. Unfortunately, the papers of the Liturgical Commission of the CofE are subject to a 30-year rule of confidentiality and cannot be accessed at this time. I have, however, studied relevant public documents debated by General Synod,³ and the transcripts of those debates published in the Synod’s *Report of Proceedings (RoP)* in 1998 and 1999.⁴ Thirdly, I make a close analysis of the mother phrase in Prayer G and

² Ramshaw, *Liturgical Language*, 5.

³ Particularly, The Liturgical Commission, *Report by the Liturgical Commission to General Synod: Eucharistic Prayers, GS 1299* (General Synod of the Church of England: London June 1998); The Liturgical Commission, *Report by the Liturgical Revision Committee: Eucharistic Prayers for the Celebration of Holy Communion Also Called the Eucharist and the Lord’s Supper, as revised in Committee May 1999, GS 1299A* (The Liturgical Commission: London May 1999); The Liturgical Commission, *Report by the Revision Committee GS 1299Y* (General Synod of CofE: London 1999); The Liturgical Commission, *Draft Eucharistic Prayers: Second Report of the Revision Committee GS 1299X* (General Synod of CofE: London 1999); The Liturgical Commission, *The Order for the Celebration of Holy Communion also called The Eucharist and The Lord’s Supper together with Eucharistic Prayers: As presented for Final Approval February 2000, GS 1211C/GS 1299C* (General Synod of the Church of England: London 2000).

⁴ General Synod of the CofE, *Report of Proceedings (RoP): General Synod July Group of Sessions 1998* (London 1998), vol. 29/2; General Synod of the CofE, *RoP: General Synod July*

compare it to similar phrases in other Eucharistic Prayers. In all of this I make use of Ramshaw's hermeneutical method when considering liturgy, that of YES-NO-YES, which I will detail below.

Of course, all liturgy is inadequate in some sense – we can never describe all that God is or all that the Divine means to us. I would like to suggest, however, that the whole process of arriving at the single comparison of God to a mother in Prayer G is characterised, at least in part, by a kind of drive towards female invisibility. This invisibility is multi-layered:

- a) Firstly, there is the dominance of the father metaphor for God over all other metaphors in our Christian heritage, including the mother metaphor.
- b) Secondly, I would argue that 30 years of feminist scholarship into the naming of God was apparently sidelined, at least by some of the relevant parties, when the General Synod of the CofE was considering the inclusion of Prayer G in the Eucharistic Prayers.
- c) Thirdly, the single reference to God being like a mother in Prayer G is itself inadequate, as I shall demonstrate below.

In order to describe the phenomenon of female invisibility in Prayer G, I use the term “defeminisation.” I understand this concept as originating in the biological sciences, referring to “an aspect of the process of sexual differentiation by which a potential female-specific structure or behaviour is changed by one of the processes of male development”⁵ but now in wider use in a variety of fields such as feminist economics and gender studies. While it sometimes refers to the “‘removal’ of female characteristics,” I am using it here to describe an aspect, or process, of male development causing the “*prevention* of an aspect of female development from manifesting.”⁶

Ramshaw's hermeneutical approach to liturgy: YES-NO-YES

Gail Ramshaw, the renowned American liturgical scholar, argues that the hermeneutical method needed when we encounter liturgy is “YES-NO-YES.”⁷

Group of Sessions 1999, (London 1999), vol. 30/1; General Synod of the CofE, *RoP: General Synod November Group of Sessions 1999*, (London 1999), vol. 30/2.

⁵ “Defeminisation: Definition and Meaning,” *Collins Dictionary* (<https://www.collingsdictionary.com>). Cited as a reference in the Wikipedia article on defeminisation footnoted below.

⁶ “Defeminization,” *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia* (11 April 2018), <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Defeminization>, 10 May 2019. Italics in original.

⁷ Gail Ramshaw, *Reviving Sacred Speech: The Meaning of Liturgical Language: Second Thoughts on Christ in Sacred Speech* (OSL Publications: Akron 2000), 32.

Our initial YES is a deep-seated response to the holy status of the words we speak and the relevance of them in our lives; the subsequent NO reflects our work as liturgy-students, critically examining the symbols and phrases that we use; our final YES, a statement which Ramshaw describes as “hard and easy,”⁸ is our (re)acknowledgement of the sacred standing of what we are saying and that we speak the communally-accepted words as a people of faith to an invisible God.⁹

The context of this article – the initial YES

In the case of this article, the initial YES takes place in the context of the Eucharistic Liturgy of the CofE and its development over nearly 500 years, the CofE being part of the world-wide Anglican Communion. Revisions of the CofE’s liturgy are not exactly commonplace; in fact, there have been more in the last 90 years than from 1662 onwards.¹⁰ Although the CofE arguably existed for centuries before the Reformation, and the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer (BCP)* was not the first version of the Prayer Book, the *BCP* is often taken as a kind of liturgical touchstone, given that it was the only authorised liturgy for 350 years.¹¹ The obligatory use of the *BCP*, published under Charles II following the restoration of the monarchy in 1660, was an attempt at establishing uniformity throughout the Church in the wake of the upheaval of the preceding years. Setting aside the unsuccessful attempt to persuade Parliament to authorise a revised Prayer Book in 1928, the *BCP* remained largely unassailable until the middle of the 20th century when pressure to modernise the liturgy resulted in various “alternative services,” that is to say “alternative to the *BCP*,” in the 1960s and -70s. This movement culminated in the landmark publication of the *Alternative Service Book (ASB)* in 1980.¹² However, the perceived need for change did not stop there; further reflection on the importance of the shape of the liturgy and the desire to give CofE parishes a breadth of liturgical freedom in their own particular context led to the publication of

⁸ Ramshaw, *Reviving Sacred Speech*, 35.

⁹ See Ramshaw, *Reviving Sacred Speech*, 32.

¹⁰ See Paul Bradshaw (ed.), *Companion to Common Worship* (SPCK: London 2001), 1, 8-37.

¹¹ The *BCP* itself was largely based on Archbishop Thomas Cranmer’s 1552 Prayer Book with subsequent revisions of the latter in 1559 and 1604. See Bradshaw (ed.), *Companion to Common Worship*, vol. 1, 10-13, for more detail.

¹² See Bradshaw (ed.), *Companion to Common Worship*, vol. 1, 12-20.

CW in 2000 CE. *CW* included the eight Eucharistic Prayers of Order One, labelled A–H,¹³ (the Prayers).¹⁴

The Prayers, therefore, were the product of many years of thought and development. Indeed, one commentary on the process of publishing *CW* (written for a general audience) comments that the Prayers of Order One “[were not] dropped fully made out of heaven. Rather [they were] the fruit of over 30 years of working, celebrating and reflecting with new forms.”¹⁵

My personal NO

With the easy perspective of hindsight, however, it is possible to see that while this 30 years of reflection and experimentation was taking place in respect of the CoFE Eucharistic Liturgy, a concurrent, and sometimes connected, work was carried out in the field of feminist theology in the area of metaphor and the naming of God. I suggest that the result of this scholarship is not particularly obvious in the Prayers that emerged in *CW*, 2000. It is here that my personal “NO” is situated.

At the heart of my “disagreement” lie two interconnected issues. First of all, there is the duty to use the language we have (in this case, British English) to express the nature and character of God to the best of our limited human ability, even though we are simultaneously attempting the impossible. As Augustine says, “Have I said anything, solemnly uttered anything that is worthy of God? On the contrary, all I feel I have done is to wish to say something; but if I have said anything, it is not what I wished to say. How do I know this? I know because God is inexpressible.”¹⁶ In my opinion, this aforementioned duty includes the need to try and capture the beyond-genderedness of God in a non-reductionist manner. This is not achieved by simply describing God as non-male, but by exposing female aspects of the Divine.

¹³ The Archbishops Council 2000, *Common Worship: Services and Prayers for the Church of England* (Church House Publishing: London 2000), 184-205.

¹⁴ From this point on, the word Prayer with an uppercase P refers to one of this particular set of Prayers unless otherwise stated.

¹⁵ Colin Buchanan, Jeremy Fletcher, James Jones et al., “Holy Communion,” in: Mark Earey and Gilly Myers (eds.), *Common Worship Today: An Illustrated Guide to Common Worship* (Harper Collins Religious: London 2001), 156.

¹⁶ John E. Rotelle (ed.), *Augustine: Teaching Christianity*, translated by Edmund Hill (New City Press: New York 1996), 11: *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, 107-108, quoted in Gail Ramshaw, *Treasures Old and New: Images in the Lectionary* (Fortress Press: Minneapolis 2002), 297.

Secondly, and intimately connected to the first point, lies the issue of women's perception of their own "status." If God is male, according to our liturgy, what does that say about my own position as a woman made in the image of God and my status vis-à-vis the men in my congregation? I would argue that these issues are of current relevance in the CofE even though women can be licensed as Readers, ordained as Priests, and consecrated as Bishops.

Elizabeth Johnson, writing in 1992, ably puts these issues into context using the "lens of women's flourishing."¹⁷ In her view, "right speech about God"¹⁸ cannot take place as something distinct from caring for all created things, particularly "for human beings in the rightness of their personal, interpersonal, social and ecological relations."¹⁹ Taking Irenaeus' maxim *Gloria Dei vivens homo* (The glory of God is the living human being), she makes the point that God is decreased in some way whenever people including women, are "violated, diminished, or have their life drained away."²⁰ This kind of interdependence between God and human beings works in both directions. Johnson quotes Segundo as saying, "[o]ur falsified and inauthentic ways of dealing with our fellow men [sic] are allied to our falsification of the idea of God. Our unjust society and our perverted idea of God are in close and terrible alliance."²¹ Johnson brings the position of women in society and the Church to the fore, when she argues:

Inherited Christian speech about God has developed within a framework that does not prize the unique and equal humanity of women, and bears the marks of this partiality and [male] dominance. This language is now under fire both for its complicity in human oppression and its capacity to rob divine reality of goodness and profound mystery.²²

Johnson views attempts to find new ways to talk about God as very important for the Church. Such an exercise serves both to combat the oppressiveness of sexism, among other evils, and to increase our perception of the glory of God.²³ However, within the CofE, there is a strongly regulated liturgy: the

¹⁷ Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (Crossroad: New York 2002), 10th Anniversary Edition with new Preface, 17.

¹⁸ Johnson, *She Who Is*, 14.

¹⁹ Johnson, *She Who Is*, 14.

²⁰ Johnson, *She Who Is*, 14.

²¹ Juan Luis Segundo, *Our Idea of God*, translated by John Drury (Orbis: Maryknoll, NY 1974), 8, quoted in Johnson, *She Who Is*, 14.

²² Johnson, *She Who Is*, 15.

²³ See Johnson, *She Who Is*, 15.

Eucharistic Prayers of Order One were published twenty years ago in 2000 and the limitations of this “inherited speech about God” remain, namely the almost complete lack of female imagery for God of any kind. So, my personal NO lies more precisely here – in the way we describe and name God in our Eucharistic Prayers, as one aspect of the liturgical experience.

Defeminisation in the Creation of the Mother Metaphor in Prayer G

Example 1. The Dominance of the Father Metaphor

Liturgy is not purely an exercise in linguistic theory. Nevertheless, at the crux of this matter, the describing and naming of God, lies the nature of metaphor. More particularly, perhaps, there is the issue of the metaphor-gap, the distance between the nature of metaphor and our understanding of it. A brief look at metaphor and its role in liturgical language is therefore relevant here. I have chosen the few authors represented in this short overview because they were feminist theologians influential in this field in the twenty to thirty years before the publication of *CW* in 2000.²⁴ I hope by this means to indicate that the Eucharistic Prayers A–H were drafted in an era where discourse concerning the describing and naming of God was very much alive in certain sections of the academy.

Human beings cannot fully comprehend or describe God and so we need to search for ways to express the inexpressible. We take refuge in talking about things we know, for example, rock, water, light, and try to use these to help define something which is beyond our human capacity to capture in words. That is to say, we speak metaphorically in order to try and grasp reality. Metaphor is the “principal means” by which we are able to speak about an inexpressible God.²⁵

Often the effectiveness of a metaphor lies in the understanding of an underlying model. Sallie McFague says that “[t]he simplest way to define a model is as a dominant metaphor, a metaphor with staying power.”²⁶ “God the Father” is one such “metaphor which has become a model” with its “comprehensive, ordering structure and its impressive interpretive potential.”²⁷

²⁴ A complete overview of the work undertaken in this area between 1970 and 2000 is outside the scope of this essay.

²⁵ Janet Martin Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language* (Clarendon Press: Oxford 1985), x.

²⁶ Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982, 41988), 23.

²⁷ McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 23.

McFague is concerned about the dominance of this “paternal model” in credal language.²⁸ For her, this “undercuts both the *content* and the *form* of metaphorical theology. It undercuts the *content* of the relationship with God as one based not on merit but on grace because paternal imagery alone is not capable of modelling this pattern.”²⁹ It then “undercuts the *form* of metaphorical theology” not because of the model itself but because of its dominance and “its status as *the* interpretative grid for Christian faith, which elevates it to an absolute, literalistic, and virtually idolatrous position.”³⁰

The question becomes: should any one model be allowed to become so dominant as has the paternal one?³¹ Given that any single metaphor is inadequate, how can we encourage a fuller and more perceptive encounter with God? McFague highlights Phyllis Trible’s work on Genesis 1: 26-30, and the gender of God.

God is neither male nor female, nor a combination of the two. And yet, detecting divine transcendence in human reality requires human clues. Unique among them, according to our poem, is sexuality. God creates, in the image of God, male and female. To describe male and female, then, is to perceive the image of God; to perceive the image of God is to glimpse the transcendence of God.³²

McFague understands Trible’s work as demonstrating the legitimacy of *both* female and maternal images of God as *part* of the way in which we attempt to describe the inexpressible.³³

That is not to say that the use of the mother metaphor is free from complexity as far as feminist liturgical theologians in this period are concerned. Firstly, there is debate about the difference between naming God as mother and stating that God is like a mother.³⁴ Secondly, there is concern about how the term ‘mother’ might be interpreted. Marjorie Proctor-Smith notes the problem of absolutising motherhood in a way that can be exclusive of women’s actual experience. She also recognises the complexities inherent in understanding the

²⁸ McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 114.

²⁹ McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 114. Italics in original.

³⁰ McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 115. Italics in original.

³¹ See McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 128.

³² Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Fortress Press: Philadelphia 1978), 121, *non vidi*, quoted in Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 169.

³³ See McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 169.

³⁴ For example, Gail Ramshaw contended with this issue in the early part of her career. See Gail Ramshaw, “Lutheran Liturgical Prayer and God as Mother,” *Worship* 52/6 (1978), 517-542.

term ‘mother’ within a patriarchal framework.³⁵ Thirdly, just as the father metaphor dominates female metaphors in liturgy, so the liturgical context itself might be a further source of female invisibility.³⁶

The work described here is only a small subsection of the scholarly texts available. The point is that it took place during the twenty to thirty years in which the development of the CofE Prayers is said to have occurred. McFague’s work in particular highlights the dominance of the father metaphor, or model,³⁷ to the almost-exclusion of any other, including that of the mother. This domination is despite the legitimacy of both paternal and maternal metaphors and/or models.

I would argue that this is the first example, or layer, of defeminisation in the Prayers that I mentioned in my introduction. Let us return to part of the definition of defeminisation outlined above: “[a]lthough the term might seem to imply ‘removal’ of female characteristics, in nearly all biological contexts it refers to *prevention* of an aspect of female development from manifesting.”³⁸ It is not the father metaphor itself which poses a problem, but rather its dominance to the extent that the mother metaphor becomes sidelined or overlooked. The female is indeed prevented from “manifesting.”

As Janet Soskice says, the difficulty is that: “Metaphors become not only part of our language but also part of the way in which we interpret our world, and the implications of one metaphor are very different from those of another.”³⁹ That is to say, if the father metaphor dominates all other metaphors then that metaphor begins to define how we actually perceive God. Any parental model for God has been defeminised; only the male portion flourishes.

Defeminisation in the Process of Including the Mother Metaphor in Prayer G Example 2. The Sidelining of Feminist Scholarship in the General Synod debates concerning Prayer G

I have argued that the development of the CofE Eucharistic Prayers A–H occurred during a period of significant feminist scholarship concerning metaphor and the describing and naming of God. I now consider the sidelining of this scholarship, at least by some of the relevant parties, when the General Synod debated the

³⁵ See Marjorie Procter-Smith, *In Her Own Rite: Constructing Feminist Liturgical Tradition* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform 2013), Chapter 4, especially 97-100.

³⁶ See Janet H. Wootton, *Introducing a Practical Feminist Theology of Worship* (Sheffield Academic Press: Sheffield 2000), Introductions in Feminist Theology 5, 17-33.

³⁷ See McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 147-152.

³⁸ “Defeminization,” *Wikipedia*, accessed 10 May 2019. Italics in original.

³⁹ Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, 62.

inclusion of Prayer G in the Prayers and some of its wording in the period from July 1998 to November 1999. I suggest that this is the second example, or layer, of defeminisation in the process of including the mother metaphor in Prayer G.

To reiterate, Prayer G contains the sole reference in the Prayers to God as mother or female in anyway:

“As a mother tenderly gathers her children, you embraced a people as your own.”⁴⁰

God is compared to a mother, though not addressed or named as such.⁴¹ Given the breadth and depth of relevant feminist scholarship during the preceding 30 years, the “female” is surprisingly absent in this collection of Prayers in general, indeed almost invisible.⁴² I will now briefly outline the process by which Prayer G, and the mother phrase within it, was included in the Eucharistic Prayers, Order One of *CW*.

The Role of the Liturgical Commission and the General Synod

In order to understand what follows, it is helpful to have a general understanding of the CofE’s Liturgical Commission and its relationship to the General Synod. The Liturgical Commission comprises a group of ordained and lay liturgical scholars, and others, who work together principally to “prepare [...] forms of service and promote [...] the development and understanding of liturgy and its use in the Church.”⁴³ The membership of the Liturgical Commission from 1996-2000 consisted of 22 members (including two co-opted members and four consultants) of whom five were women.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ The Archbishops Council 2000, *Common Worship: Services and Prayers for the Church of England*, 201.

⁴¹ See, for comparison, the second of the four Thanksgiving Prayers for Ordinary Seasons of the Methodist Church in England, which reads “God our Father and our Mother.” Trustees for Methodist Church Purposes, *The Methodist Worship Book* (Peterborough: Methodist Publishing House, 1999), 204. The date of publication of this volume is a year before that of the CofE’s *Common Worship*.

⁴² There are three references to Jesus being born of Mary in the Prayers: Prayer A “giving him to be born of a woman;” Prayer B “born of the blessed Virgin;” Prayer G “born of Mary.” See The Archbishops Council 2000, *Common Worship: Services and Prayers for the Church of England*, 184, 188, 201.

⁴³ *The Liturgical Commission*, s.a., <https://www.churchofengland.org/prayer-and-worship/worship-texts-and-resources/liturgical-commission>, 19 May 2019.

⁴⁴ The five female members of the committee were Dr. Carole Cull, Revd. Susan Hope, Mrs. Anna de Lange, Revd. Canon Jane Sinclair, Revd. Anna Tilby. As received in an attachment to an email sent to me on 5 June 2018 from Ms. Sue Moore, Administrative Secretary to the Liturgical Commission, quoting from *The Church of England Year Book 1999* (London:

One of the main tasks of the Commission is to prepare the drafts of potential CofE services and submit them to the General Synod and the House of Bishops of the CofE for debate, reference to diocesan synods, request for revision, and final acceptance.⁴⁵

The General Synod comprises three houses: (1) the House of Bishops (diocesan bishops and their elected suffragan bishops), (2) the House of Clergy (elected clergy representatives from each diocese of the CofE, and some universities), and (3) the House of Laity (elected lay representatives from each diocese).⁴⁶ Revisions of the liturgy must be accepted by the General Synod to pass into legal usage in the CofE.⁴⁷ New services require the approval of a two-thirds majority of each house within the Synod.⁴⁸

A brief history of the inclusion of Prayer G in the Prayers of Order One, Common Worship

The 1662 *Book of Common Prayer (BCP)* was the liturgical point of reference within the CofE until the mid-20th century, when pressure to modernise the liturgy resulted in various “alternative services” to the *BCP* in the 1960s and -70s. This movement culminated in the highly significant publication of the *Alternative Service Book (ASB)* in 1980, which was authorised for 20 years.⁴⁹ The four Eucharistic Prayers of Rite A in the *ASB* contained no reference to God as mother.⁵⁰

Church House Publishing 1999), *non vidi*. Not all these members would have been involved in drafting all the Eucharistic Prayers (Information contained in same email). We do not know what the contribution of these five women was to the process as there is a 30-year rule of confidentiality governing the work of the Liturgical Commission.

⁴⁵ The General Synod, “is the national assembly of The Church of England. It came into being in 1970 under the Synodical Government Measure 1969, replacing an earlier body known as the Church Assembly. The General Synod considers and approves legislation affecting the whole of The Church of England, formulates new forms of worship, debates matters of national and international importance, and approves the annual budget for the work of the Church at national level.” *The General Synod*. <https://www.churchofengland.org/about/leadership-and-governance/about-general-synod>, 19 May 2019.

⁴⁶ See *The General Synod*.

⁴⁷ In this situation, the General Synod is acting on behalf of Parliament. This is in line with the Prayer Book (Alternative and Other Services) Measure 1965, delegating powers from Parliament to the then Church Assembly and later the General Synod for the approval of new services. See Bradshaw, *Companion to Common Worship*, vol. 1, 16-17.

⁴⁸ See Earey and Myers (eds.), *Common Worship Today*, 101.

⁴⁹ See Bradshaw (ed.), *Companion to Common Worship*, vol. 1, 20.

⁵⁰ *The Alternative Service Book 1980 Together with the Liturgical Psalter* (CUP: Cambridge 1980), 130-141. The Third Eucharistic Prayer contains a reference to Mary, 136.

Work began in earnest on the *ASB*'s successor in the early 1990s⁵¹ and it is important to note that this included a move towards more explicitly inclusive language for the congregation (as opposed to frequent references to 'fellow men', for example).⁵²

The phrase,

As a mother tenderly gathers her children
you embraced a people as your own [...]⁵³

appeared in Eucharistic Prayer 2 of six Eucharistic Prayers prepared by the Liturgical Commission in 1996. However, this proposal was rejected by the General Synod. Colin Buchanan, member of the Revision Committee on Eucharistic Prayers 1995, and Trevor Lloyd, chairman of the Steering Committee on Eucharistic Prayers 1995, commented as follows on the outcome of this process:

On 13 and 14 February 1996, for the first time in over sixteen years, the General Synod of The Church of England voted on a motion to give Final Approval to six new eucharistic prayers. To our deep regret, the House of Laity of the Synod failed to give the prayers the two-thirds majority needed for authorisation and they were accordingly defeated.⁵⁴

Buchanan and Lloyd noted that the reasons for the defeat were unknown.

On 13-14 February 1996 the Synod debated 'Final Approval.' The voting, requiring a two-thirds majority in each House, was: Bishops 25-10: Clergy 164-44: Laity 135-81. And that was that. For the first time liturgical texts had been rejected in Synod without anyone knowing what was determinative in that defeat.⁵⁵

So, the Liturgical Commission was obliged to produce amended Prayers for consideration. The Report of the Liturgical Commission to General Synod dated June 1998 mentions six potential Eucharistic Prayers for inclusion within

⁵¹ See Bradshaw (ed.), *Companion to Common Worship*, vol. 1, 32.

⁵² A full treatment of this issue is outside the scope of this essay but see Bradshaw (ed.), *Companion to Common Worship*, vol. 1, 26-27 and The Liturgical Commission, *Making Women Visible: The Use of Inclusive Language With The ASB, A Report by the Liturgical Commission of the General Synod of the Church of England* (Church House Publishing: London 1988), GS 859, for more information.

⁵³ Colin Buchanan and Trevor Lloyd, *Six Eucharistic Prayers as Proposed in 1996* (Grove Booklets: Cambridge 1996), Worship Series 136, 12.

⁵⁴ Buchanan and Lloyd, *Six Eucharistic Prayers as Proposed in 1996*, 3.

⁵⁵ Buchanan and Lloyd, *Six Eucharistic Prayers*, 9.

Order One of *CW* (now Prayers A-F)⁵⁶. However, the Prayer which was to become Prayer G, including the sentence ‘as a mother tenderly [...]’, was not among them. Buchanan and Reid summarised the situation:

This prayer came into the set of eight Eucharistic Prayers at a very late stage. It has its origins in a text composed by the Roman Catholic International Committee for English in Liturgy (ICEL) in 1984, and a text very like it was among the six proposed to General Synod in February 1996 and then defeated there – which is why it was not among the new texts proposed by the Commission in 1998.⁵⁷

This summary does not completely clarify the reasons why a Prayer G-like text was not included, but it is interesting that there was no reintroduction of a Prayer containing a ‘mother’ phrase at this point. This speaks to defeminisation in a subtle way: The Prayers which used the father metaphor dominated and a text containing the mother metaphor did not manifest at this point.⁵⁸

Considerable thought was then given at the July 1998 meeting of the General Synod as to what should be included in each of the approved Eucharistic Prayers:

Yet what should go into such a prayer? The jury is still out on many of the details but the consensus seems to be an opening dialogue that signals the prayer’s uniqueness, a thanksgiving for creation and redemption which might focus on a particular aspect or mystery, the *Sanctus* hymn borrowed by Christians at an early stage from the synagogue to sing of the union of earth and heaven (namely the particular historical occasion of the Eucharist within the eternal work of Christ), the thanksgiving continued with the institution narrative which provides the pivot, the psychological heart of the prayer, and the thanksgiving concluded, linking this narrative to the work of Christ and praying for the presence of the Spirit on the Eucharist for the renewal of the people of God and for the whole creation.

This is the broad consensus at this moment in history.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ The Liturgical Commission, *Report by The Liturgical Commission to General Synod: Eucharistic Prayers*, GS 1299.

⁵⁷ Colin Buchanan and Charles Reid, *The Eucharistic Prayers of Order One, Reprint of First Edition with Corrections* (Grove Books Limited: Cambridge 2001), Worship Series 158, 24.

⁵⁸ As a side issue, the Report in June 1998 still questioned whether a choice of Prayers was actually needed at all. See The Liturgical Commission, *Report by The Liturgical Commission to General Synod: Eucharistic Prayers*, GS 1299, 1-2. It is slightly surprising that this question was raised at this point, given the *ASB*, published in 1980, already had four Eucharistic Prayers within Rite A. This question speaks, albeit peripherally, to the idea of defeminisation: given that there was no reference to God as mother in the six Prayers included in the June 1998 report, it is very unlikely that a solitary Eucharistic Prayer would contain such a phrase.

⁵⁹ The Bishop of Portsmouth, the Rt. Revd. Kenneth Stevenson, consultant to the Liturgical Commission from 1996–2000, *RoP: July Group of sessions 1998*, vol. 29/2, 641.

However, the report of this July 1998 Synod debate contained no suggestion of including some of the maternal metaphors for God found in Scripture within the Eucharistic Prayers. This is despite the fact that there had been a reference to God as mother in Eucharistic Prayer 2 of the six Prayers that were rejected back in 1996 by the House of Laity of the Synod, as detailed above.

The Sidelineing of Feminist Scholarship Within the General Synod Debates of July 1999 and November 1999

By the time of the General Synod of July 1999, the Liturgical Revision Committee had produced revised versions of the 6 Prayers A to F⁶⁰ and submitted a draft Eucharistic Prayer for consideration, annexed in a further report.⁶¹ This draft text was similar to Eucharistic Prayer 2, part of the six Prayers that were defeated by General Synod in 1996.⁶² In line with the wishes of Synod, the draft Prayer was not offered as an independent entity, that is, as a future Prayer G, but as “material [...] [which] might be incorporated in the extended Prefaces and for use with the Eucharistic Prayer F.”⁶³

During the July 1999 General Synod debate, the Bishop of Oxford, Richard Harries, indeed moved that the first part of this annexed Prayer be returned to the revision committee with a view to it becoming an alternative preface to Prayer F.⁶⁴ That is, it would still not be a distinct Eucharistic Prayer. He commented:

I am not going to go through all the merits of the first part of that prayer;
I would just like to draw members' attention to lines 35-43 on page 48:
'How wonderful the work of your hands, O Lord!
As a mother tenderly gathers her children
you embraced a people as your own.
When they turned away and rebelled

⁶⁰ The Liturgical Commission, *Report by The Liturgical Revision Committee: Eucharistic Prayers for The Celebration of Holy Communion Also Called The Eucharist and The Lord's Supper, as revised in Committee May 1999*, GS 1299A (The Liturgical Commission: London May 1999).

⁶¹ The Liturgical Commission, *Report by the Revision Committee* GS 1299Y, (General Synod of CofE: London 1999), 48-50. Referenced in *RoP: July Group of Sessions 1999*, vol. 30/1, 91.

⁶² See Buchanan and Reid, *The Eucharistic Prayers of Order One*, 24, and Buchanan and Lloyd, *Six Eucharistic Prayers as Proposed in 1996*, 12.

⁶³ Comments by the Bishop of St Albans, the Rt. Revd. Christopher Herbert, *RoP: General Synod July Group of Sessions 1999*, vol. 30/1, 93.

⁶⁴ Comments by the Bishop of Oxford, the Rt. Revd. Richard Harries, *RoP: General Synod July Group of Sessions 1999*, vol. 30/1, 406-407.

your love remained steadfast.

[...]

It would be a terrible pity if those lines were lost. They are biblical – in those first few phrases we have a direct echo of the words of Our Lord: ‘O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, stoning the prophets and those who have sent you, how often would I have gathered you to me as a hen gathers her children under her wing.’⁶⁵

However, when it came to the General Synod meeting of November 1999, what had been suggested as an alternative preface to Prayer F was now under serious consideration as a Eucharistic Prayer in its own right, namely Prayer G.⁶⁶ At that point, the suggested Prayer had several detractors, although their criticisms generally concerned the procedure by which Prayer G had been accepted for discussion and various points of Eucharistic and Christological theology, rather than the mother phrase.⁶⁷ Nevertheless, had those detractors held sway, the final group of Eucharistic Prayers would have contained no reference to God as mother.

The supporters of Prayer G commented favourably on the mothering phrase. The Bishop of Oxford, Richard Harries, strongly defended the acceptance of the Prayer because he believed “it has particular literary strengths and theological insights.”⁶⁸

After the *Sanctus*, ‘How wonderful the work of your hands, O Lord! As a mother tenderly gathers her children you embraced a people as your own.’ As the Bishop of Portsmouth has already pointed out, this is not to address God as mother; it is using fully biblical imagery from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah and from the Gospels, where Jesus for example lamented over Jerusalem and said, ‘How I longed to gather you to me as a hen gathers her chicks under her arms,’ Is it not vital today to have some imagery of motherhood, some feminine imagery? Personally, I would like to have far more; I would like to have something of this in every eucharistic prayer. Given the importance of this for so many people today, surely we need it in at least one eucharistic prayer?⁶⁹

⁶⁵ Comments by the Bishop of Oxford, *RoP: July Group of Sessions 1999*, vol. 30/1, 406.

⁶⁶ The Liturgical Commission, The Liturgical Commission, *Draft Eucharistic Prayers: Second Report of the Revision Committee GS 1299X* (General Synod of CofE: London 1999); 11-12 and Annex 2. Referenced in *Second Report by the Revision Committee GS 1299X*. Referenced in *RoP: November Group of Sessions 1999*, vol. 30/2, 261, 291.

⁶⁷ For example, Doctor Peter Capon, delegate for Manchester; Mrs Rosalind Campbell, delegate for Chester; Revd Simon Killwick, delegate for Manchester; the Bishop of Peterborough, the Rt. Revd. Ian Cundy, General Synod of the CofE, *RoP: General Synod November Group of Sessions 1999* (General Synod of the CofE: London 1999), vol. 30/2, 294-295, 297-298 and 311 respectively.

⁶⁸ Comments by the Bishop of Oxford, *RoP: November Group of Sessions 1999*, vol. 30/2, 309.

⁶⁹ Comments by the Bishop of Oxford, *RoP: November Group of Sessions 1999*, vol. 30/2, 310.

And the Bishop of Salisbury, David Stancliffe, added his support:

I know that the Bishop of Oxford has championed this prayer for theological reasons for some time. [...] I think that there is nothing in this prayer that we should not welcome and much that we should, and I hope that the Synod will vote for it.⁷⁰

However, one general supporter of the Prayer was the Bishop of Portsmouth, Kenneth Stevenson, who commented negatively on the work of feminist scholars in relation to the mother phrase:

Some concern has been expressed about the mother image in this prayer, but I would direct members of the Synod to Isaiah 49.15, “Can a mother forget her nursing child?;” and “A hen gathering her children” – Matthew 23.37, Luke 13.34. This ancillary allusion to motherhood in the Godhead is not a creation of strident late twentieth-century feminism. It is deep in the tradition and is to be found in Julian of Norwich. In saying that, I would like to allay some fears and open up that memory – which we are doing all the time when we write prayers, because we are standing where we are, and gathering the information and knowledge that we have.⁷¹

There are various issues of note here:

- (1) It is surprising that there has been “concern [...] expressed” at all. This was the only maternal reference concerning God in all the eight prayers under discussion at this point in the process.
- (2) It is interesting that the concern over references to “motherhood in the Godhead” were about an “ancillary allusion” to such motherhood, indicating a lack of recognition that the mother phrase expresses an important characteristic of God. To quote Tribble again:

God creates, in the image of God, male and female. To describe male and female, then, is to perceive the image of God; to perceive the image of God is to glimpse the transcendence of God.⁷²

⁷⁰ Comments by the Bishop of Salisbury, the Rt. Revd. David Stancliffe, chairman of the Liturgical Commission from 1996–2000, *RoP: November Group of Sessions 1999*, vol. 30/2, 312.

⁷¹ Comments by the Bishop of Portsmouth, *RoP: November Group of Sessions 1999*, vol. 30/2, 296.

⁷² Phyllis Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Fortress Press: Philadelphia 1978), 121, *non vidi*, quoted in McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 169.

- (3) The use of the adjective “strident” to describe “late twentieth-century feminism” in general. This seems a particularly negative way of talking about the collective work of many different scholars. It sidelines the importance of the academic work done in the area of metaphor and describing God in liturgy.

Nevertheless, the Bishop expressed the very biblical nature of the mothering phrase and supported the inclusion of Prayer G in the Prayers in general.

Finally, Prayer G was accepted into the final collection of “draft eucharistic prayers contained in [the document] GS 1299B,”⁷³ although there are no records in the relevant *RoP* as to the voting pattern in this case. Prayer G was then included in the document GS 1211C/ GS 1299C, which included all eight Prayers A–H for final approval by the General Synod in February 2000.⁷⁴ *CW* itself was launched on the first Sunday in Advent 2000.

There was now one Prayer with one reference to God being like a mother (as opposed to a father) in the Eucharistic Prayers of Order One. However, the contribution of feminist scholarship in the area of metaphor and the description and naming of God was either not mentioned or was described somewhat negatively in this particular process. This is the second example, or layer, of defeminisation in Prayer G, as I see it. The category of scholar has been defeminised here; the female has been prevented from manifesting.

Defeminisation in the creation of the mother metaphor in Prayer G

Example 3. The mother who does not feed her children

What kind of mother is God like in Prayer G?

The phrase which we are considering suggests that the mother “gathers” her offspring in a tender manner. The word “gather” or “gathers” appears in some of the other Eucharistic Prayers too, specifically Prayers B, E and F. This section will look at the close context of the “gathering phrase” in each case and what that might say about the God who “gathers”. Is there a difference between a father who “gathers” or a mother who “gathers”? The relevant material reads as follows:

Prayer B – “[...] **gather** into one in your kingdom all who share this one bread and one cup [...]”

⁷³ See *RoP: November Group of Sessions 1999*, vol. 30/2, 312.

⁷⁴ *The Order for the Celebration of Holy Communion Also Called The Eucharist and The Lord's Supper Together with Eucharistic Prayers* GS 1211C/GS 1299C (General Synod of the Church of England: London February 2000), 37.

Prayer E – “Look with favour on your people, **gather** us in your loving arms and bring us with [N and] all the saints to feast at your table in heaven [...]”

Prayer F – “**Gather** your people from the ends of the earth to feast with [N and] all the saints at the table in your kingdom,”

Prayer G – “As a mother tenderly **gathers** her children, you embraced a people as your own.”⁷⁵

Significantly, B, E and F all mention feeding or feasting in some way as part of the “gathering phrase” itself; Prayer G, the mother prayer, does not. However, one task that a human mother is (usually) capable of doing is feeding a child herself, although that is not to say that all human mothers do so.

Of course, any metaphor for the Divine is necessarily limited, the mother metaphor or anything else. No single metaphor can say everything about God, nor should we fall into literalism. However, I think this is a strange and telling omission; the one activity the God as mother could do naturally from within herself (in the case of breastfeeding), and which is totally sustaining of life, is not identified and celebrated in the Eucharistic Prayers. Only the father God plays this role in any way.⁷⁶

This seems to be a prime example of the dominance of the father metaphor or, you could say, the paternal model (following McFague). The mother God is defeminised: the father takes over the role that she could play at least in part, in addition to everything else he is doing. This is despite the fact that, according to one Synod debate, one of the supporting biblical verses for this prayer is Isaiah 49:15,⁷⁷ a verse in which God is compared to a nursing mother. Here in the “gathering phrases” of the Eucharistic Prayers, the father “feeds” his people to the exclusion of the mother, even though she has children (a close personal relationship) while he appears to have subjects or citizens in the phrases I have indicated. She only “gather[s] her children,” as opposed to all the tasks which are performed by the father God, and she cannot even look after those children fully.

⁷⁵ See The Archbishops Council 2000, *Common Worship: Services and Prayers for the Church of England*, 190, 197, 201. Emphasis is mine.

⁷⁶ In saying this, I do not want to get distracted by the fact that some women cannot breastfeed or choose not to do so. I do not think this is a comment on their ability to be a good mother, nor does it define motherhood in general. And, of course, fathers can feed their children in other ways. That is not what I am talking about here.

⁷⁷ Comments by the Bishop of Portsmouth, *RoP: November Group of Sessions 1999*, vol. 30/2, 296.

One of the un-nuanced and disparaging criticisms levelled at some kinds of feminist scholarship is that everything is simply all about female bodily function. Whatever the truths or otherwise of such criticism, that is not a reason for overlooking the female body as a site for theology.⁷⁸ In this case, I think that it is perfectly reasonable to question why the one image of God as a mother in the current CofE Eucharistic Prayers does not include the idea of feeding her children, while there are several references to God the father doing so.

The omission of feeding or feasting from the mothering phrase in Prayer G is highly relevant, given the biblical references to God as a nursing mother mentioned in the relevant Synod debates. Why does only the father God feed his people in these Eucharistic Prayers? The mother God appears to be the protector of her children but, bizarrely, does not feed them. She is, I would argue, defeminised. An important part of her being is prevented from manifesting.

Conclusion

In reflecting on this work, I have highlighted a recurrent theme, which I have called “defeminisation.” To remind ourselves of the definition from the world of biological sciences:

In developmental biology and zoology, **defeminisation** is an aspect of the process of sexual differentiation by which a potential female-specific structure, function, or behavior is changed by one of the processes of male development. Although the term might seem to imply “removal” of female characteristics, in nearly all biological contexts it refers to *prevention* of an aspect of female development from manifesting.⁷⁹

I am obviously not suggesting taking a biological definition and applying it directly to the area of liturgical prayer. That would be an absurd simplification. However, I think that the last part of the definition, “the prevention of an aspect of female development from manifesting,” is relevant here. It is a thread which appears to run right through the process surrounding the mothering metaphor in Prayer G.

⁷⁸ See for example Linda Hogan, *From Women's Experience to Feminist Theology* (Sheffield Academic Press: Sheffield 1997) for a positive stance on this.

⁷⁹ “Defeminization”, *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*, 11 April 2018, (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Defeminization>, 10 May 2019).

First of all, it appears in the dominance of the father metaphor within our Christian heritage and so, of course, in our liturgy. The father metaphor is prevalent to the point of excluding other metaphors, including the maternal one. The paternal model pervades all; the female is prevented from manifesting.

Secondly, there is the sidelining of 30 years of feminist scholarship into the naming and describing of God when Prayer G was being considered for use as part of *CW*. One of the interesting things to notice about the 1998 and 1999 debates which took place concerning the acceptance of Prayer G is the lack of reference to such feminist scholarship. I mention this period of time, of course, because of the quote cited above: “[The Eucharistic Prayers of Order One were not] dropped fully made out of heaven. Rather [they were] the fruit of over 30 years of working, celebrating and reflecting with new forms.”⁸⁰ The feminist scholars mentioned in this essay are only a few of the many feminist theologians at work during this same 30-year period and I have only cited certain of their works. I could have mentioned many others, both systematic and liturgical theologians, who studied the father metaphor, and/or the patriarchal model, in different ways in the period 1970 to 2000.⁸¹ Yet in his comments on the mother image in Prayer G in 1999, the Bishop of Portsmouth (albeit only one commentator) negates the work of feminist scholars – the capacity of scholarship is taken away from them. You could say the category of scholar is defeminised. They have only contributed stridency, not detailed academic work which has received international recognition: “This ancillary allusion to motherhood in the Godhead is not a creation of strident late twentieth-century feminism.”⁸² Neither the Bishop of Oxford nor the Bishop of Salisbury, although supporters of the mother phrase in Prayer G, mention (in the November 1999 debate) the contribution of feminist scholars to the process.

I wonder about a possible chicken-and-egg situation concerning defeminisation in liturgy and life. If you put so little value on female academic scholarship

⁸⁰ Earey and Myers (eds.), *Common Worship Today*, 156.

⁸¹ A tiny sample includes Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Beacon Press: Boston and Toronto 1993); Daphne Hampson, *Theology and Feminism* (Blackwell: London 1990); Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, (Crossroad: New York 1994, Tenth Anniversary Edition); Jane Shaw, “Women, Rationality and Theology,” in: Daphne Hampson (ed), *Swallowing a Fishbone: Feminist Theologians Debate Christianity*, (SPCK: London 1996), 50-65; Sarah Coakley, “Kenosis and Subversion: On the Repression of ‘Vulnerability’ in Christian Feminist Writing,” in: Hampson (ed.), *Swallowing a Fishbone*, 82-111.

⁸² Comments by the Bishop of Portsmouth, *RoP: November Group of Sessions 1999*, vol. 30/2, 296.

and its conclusions, does this influence how keen you are, or not, to increase the number of female metaphors for God in liturgy? Or vice-versa?

Thirdly, the single reference to God being like a mother in Prayer G is itself deeply inadequate; it is here that my suggestion of defeminisation as a characteristic of the whole process is most apparent. Above all else, it is there in the person of God herself as depicted in the phrase in Prayer G. As indicated in my analysis of the “gathering phrases” in Prayers A–H above, the God as mother who “gathers” her children in Prayer G does not feed them, whether you imagine this as breastfeeding or any other kind of nourishment. This is very different to the father God in “gathering phrases” in the other Eucharistic Prayers.

If Ramshaw is right and liturgy really is “the essential and primary speech, the basic language from which all other speech flows in exposition and reflection,”⁸³ then it seems to me that what we codify in our liturgies really matters. This is because it expresses what we really think about the Divine, in so far as we can humanly express it at all. And, if that is the centre, or the starting point of all that we say in life, then, in a very real sense, everything ripples out from that. If there is defeminisation in liturgy (the “primary speech” in which we participate), then what is the relationship between defeminisation in liturgy and defeminisation in the sense that it occurs, or might occur, in other walks of life. If there is a relationship does it, in part, account in any way for the invisibility with which we wrestled at the ESWTR conference, Leuven, September 2019?

What happens when we rewrite our liturgy? If we are prepared to change or develop the metaphors we use to try and express God and to write such changes into our Eucharistic Prayers, does this effect change in life in general, in society, in our work practices, in our churches? Would re-writing what we say on Sunday morning mitigate the invisibility with which we contend?

Whatever the response to these wide-ranging questions, I think that I have demonstrated a specific case for suggesting that the process of creating the mothering phrase in Prayer G is characterised by defeminisation, or you could say by a drive towards female invisibility: there is the over-dominance of the father metaphor to the detriment of other metaphors including female ones, the lack of regard given to female scholarship of the 1970-1990s in the debates about Prayer G in the General Synod in 1988 and 1999, and the defeminisation

⁸³ Ramshaw, *Liturgical Language: Keeping It Metaphoric, Keeping It Inclusive*, 5.

of God herself in the single mothering reference which does occur. I am aware that some may think that such a concentration on the need for appropriate references to a mothering God is something of an old-fashioned argument; a striving after a dualistic view of the Divine which feels slightly out-of-date. I would argue against this position. Yes, I am discussing a historical situation which perhaps took place in a specific climate of thought about the naming of God, which might have changed direction in some ways now (although I am not totally convinced that this is the case). However, the liturgy itself is current and is repeated Sunday by Sunday now by the people of God. It is the primary speech which we utter today and so is of the utmost relevance.

Towards a final YES

To conclude with Ramshaw, we have to find a way from YES through NO and back to YES again where liturgy is concerned. We have to stand up in Church on Sundays and say something to which we can give our assent. I am bringing the issue of defeminisation to the fore in the hope that those within the relevant C of E bodies will be moved to reconsider the lack of female metaphors for God in Prayers A–H, or their successors, and that such things might one day form a more significant part of the “primary speech” of the CofE.

Bess Brooks is a mature student in the Research Masters Programme in the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies, KU Leuven, supervised by Professor Dr. Joris Geldhof. Her current research interests are female representations of God in liturgy, the work of Gail Ramshaw and the historical debates of the Church of England’s General Synod concerning liturgical reform. She will soon be licensed as a Reader in the Church of England (Diocese of Europe). bess@family-brooks.org