

IV. Christianity

The Christian religion developed without a female godhead. The doctrine of the Trinity, as articulated in the early church, defined a triad of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit that was predominantly interpreted in masculine terms. The Christian preoccupation with “god” rather than “goddess” seems to be linked to its biblical origins. Although the notion of God in the HB/OT is not explicitly presented as being feminine, there are numerous indications that God is not to be understood in exclusively masculine terms. Yet there are occasional Christian receptions of maternal images for God, as in *Enarrat. Ps. 26* (27), where Augustine (d. 430) interprets Ps 27:10 (“If my father and mother forsake me, the Lord will take me up.”) as follows:

[Deus] Pater est, quia condidit, quia vocat, quia iubet, quia regit; mater, quia fovet, quia nutrit, quia lactat, quia continet.

God is father, because he created, because he is calling, because he commands, because he reigns; God is mother, because he cares, because he nurses, because he preserves.

Both the NT and the Christian tradition relate references to Woman Wisdom in the HB/OT wisdom literature to Jesus Christ. Furthermore, the dove in some particular NT passages (e.g., Mark 1:10) was interpreted as God’s spirit of love in early Eastern and Greek iconography, for the female in the Song of Songs is depicted as a dove (Song 2:14; 5:2; 6:9). This interpretation connects the Spirit to the doves of the goddess of love, e.g., Aphrodite and Astarte (Keel: 58–59; Schroer: 146–52). God’s feminine and maternal side in interpretations of John 3:1–8 are suggested by the image of being born of the spirit (Gerber: 48–53).

In the history of the church’s reception of the NT, allusions to potentially feminine or maternal traits of Jesus Christ oscillate between marginalization and emphasis.

The feminine element in the concept of God gained in importance in the early church as questions arose concerning the θεοτόκος (the one who gave birth to God, Mary the mother of Jesus). The veneration of Mary, which developed particularly in medieval Franciscan monasticism, echoes occasionally a quaternary doctrine, i.e., Mary is taken to be a person of the godhead. Bernardino de Busti considered Mary to be the wife of God the Father, given to him as his bride prior to her earthly existence. The Franciscan notions won out over those of the Dominicans and culminated in the pronouncement of the Immaculate Conception and the decree of September 15, 1483 at the Council of Basel concerning its teaching as well as a festival in the church calendar. The feasts honoring Mary (*In Nativitate Beatae Mariae Virginis* on the eighth of September and *Conceptio Immaculata* on the eighth of December), which arose during the medieval period, testify to a mariological reading of Prov 8:22–31.

Mary is identified as the personification of eternal divine wisdom. The idea of Mary’s preexistence is also predominant in Middle High German poetry (Kern).

Finally, women’s mysticism (among them, Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias*; Mechthild of Magdeburg, *The Flowing Light of Divinity* [*Das fließende Licht der Gottheit*]; Marguerite Porete, *The Mirror of Simple Souls* [*Le Mirouer des simples ames anienties*]; and Julian of Norwich, *Revelation of Divine Love*) developed a “feminized Christology of love (*Minne*) and wisdom (*Sophia*) in the Middle Ages, the beginnings of which can be found in the writings of some church fathers” (Wiethaus: 253). The Cistercians and their best known representative, Bernard of Clairvaux, espouse ideas of God which attribute maternal characteristics to God and to Christ.

Descriptions of God as a woman who nourishes the soul on her breast, who dries its tears, punishes its misbehavior, and painfully gives birth to it are part of a growing tendency in monastic literature of the 12th century to speak of the divinity in domestic imagery and thus to emphasize its accessibility. (Walker Bynum: 129)

In his writings about Mary, the physician, lay theologian, and reformer Paracelsus (d. 1541) emphatically declared Mary to be a goddess, but his position is unique. For Paracelsus, Mary is a complementary manifestation of the creator God and unquestionably a goddess at the side of God (Gause: 39). Due to Protestantism’s criticism of both the veneration of saints and its emphasis on Jesus as sole intermediary (*solus Christus*), Mary’s importance diminished. She is explicitly rejected as both queen of heaven and God’s advocate. Female images of God are used, however, when adopting biblical motifs; for example in writings meant to console women, God is spoken of as the midwife (Struckmeier: 41–45).

Speculation about *Sophia* gained a foothold in Protestantism in the 17th and 18th centuries: Jacob Böhme (d. 1624), the shoemaker from Görlitz, claimed *Sophia* to be the fourth person of the Trinity – possibly on the basis of Paracelsus’ teachings. In 1700, the pietist and church critic Gottfried Arnold (d. 1714) published “The Secret of Divine *Sophia*.” The heterodox community of Shakers understands divinity to be both masculine and feminine and reflects this dualism in its rule of celibacy.

During these two centuries, the veneration of Mary remains a feature of Catholic doctrine. Mary is not perceived as divine, but as a *coredemptrix*. After the establishment of a new order in Europe and the associated ecclesiastical balance of power in 1803, a host of ecstatic experiences connected with stigmata as well as apparitions of Mary were reported. These two phenomena contribute to the feminization of religion and the standardization of Roman Catholic piety: on the one hand, they accommodate the need for sensible, tangible religiosity based on well known mystical traditions during a time of

great change and uncertainty; on the other hand, the pilgrimages associated with these apparitions and connection between the veneration of the Immaculate Heart of Mary with that of the Sacred Heart of Jesus signal the development of a unified piety among the masses. In the process, although *coredemptrix* and *redemptor* remain clearly separate in church dogma, the boundary between god and goddess blurs in everyday expressions of piety. The pronouncement of the dogmas of *Immaculata Conceptio* in 1854 and of the bodily assumption of Mary into heaven in 1950, both of which strengthen the authority of the papacy, take this new quality of the veneration of Mary into account.

Even though she appears mostly at the fringes of orthodoxy, a feminine divine personage remains a component of Christianity as biblical motifs are received and further developed.

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Ute Gause