New Images of the Trinity for the New Millennium

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Much of our thinking about God is influenced not so much by creeds as by our imaginations and the mental images we have. This is particularly true for images of the Trinity. Expanding our repertoire of trinitarian images will permit us to “see” and experience God in new and vital ways.

At my age I should no longer be surprised when God bursts into my prayer to rattle some venerable theological foundations. But I was surprised and then delighted with the latest intrusion. I was pondering an essay on the Trinity by theologian Catherine LaCugna when I chanced to glance up at the framed picture of The Gleaners by Jean-Francoise Millet hanging on my bedroom wall. With that glance I realized that I had discovered an exciting new image of the Trinity for myself. This picture had hung on my wall for twenty years, ever since I acquired it from my mother’s home after her death. Perhaps because she was named after Ruth, the biblical gleaner, she had treasured this picture, and I valued it as a keepsake since I carry the same name. On this particular day, however, I discovered that this painting was also inviting me into further readings and reflections on the Trinity.

I found two books that helped me to articulate my own questions and to search for new answers in regard to the age-old doctrines surrounding the Trinity and the nature of God: She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse by Elizabeth Johnson and God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life by Catherine LaCugna. Both authors see the Trinity as a model of mutuality, equality, reciprocity, and as a communion of persons seeking to enter into a deep relationship with all creation. “In the end, the Trinity provides a sym-

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bolic picture of totally shared life at the heart of the universe. . . . The Trinity as pure relationship, moreover, epitomizes the connectedness of all that exists in the universe” (Johnson, 222). These authors supported my growing uneasiness with current prevailing images of the Trinity.

I have become convinced that it is imperative for Christians to formulate new and inspiring visual and verbal images of the Trinity. For nearly two thousand years Christianity has been dominated by the one prevailing image of the Trinity which features two bearded, white males enthroned on the clouds, with a white dove hovering over them. This portrayal is becoming increasingly unacceptable to many Christians, especially as current theology acknowledges the inadequacy of an image of God devoid of the feminine. Yet images are necessary for the human mind to articulate and explore the mystery of the divine nature and to ponder God’s involvement with the world. But no single human thought, word, or picture can adequately capture or describe the identity of God. Thus a variety of images are needed in order to begin even an elementary appreciation for the mystery of the divine nature.

**Variety of Images of God**

Although our Sacred Scriptures do not provide us with explicitly trinitarian images, we can glean examples from them of how to stretch our imaginations when we try to talk about or to picture God. The Hebrew Scriptures provide a wonderful variety of images to describe God, the most common being creator, king, lord, lawgiver, warrior, and liberator. But there are others less well known, mostly from the Wisdom books and Isaiah, ranging from inanimate to human metaphors: light, stronghold, shelter, rock, wisdom, helper, mother, father, midwife, farmer, and shepherd, to name just a few. Jesus (the unique image of God in human form) gave us other profound word-pictures of God, including *abba*, good shepherd, landlord, vine-grower, healer, a woman searching for a lost coin, a woman kneading bread, a father looking for a prodigal son, a mother hen sheltering her chicks. Unknown to many Christians today, several of the early writings of the Christian movement incorporated both feminine and masculine images for God. In homilies and theological reflections of the first Christian centuries, the motherhood of God was freely acknowledged along with the fatherhood of God.

The earliest existing artistic representation of the Trinity, found on a sarcophagus now in the Lateran Museum in Rome, shows three bearded men fashioning a tiny Eve while Adam sleeps nearby. Chronologically, the next representations of the Trinity were images of three identical male figures, the visitors of Abraham and Sarah. Another early image portrayed a hand representing the Father, a dove representing the Spirit, and a lamb representing the Son. Manuscripts of
eleventh-century England contain a variety of images of the Trinity, such as three masculine persons enthroned side by side surrounded by angels, or two seated masculine figures with a dove above them, or the enthroned Christ crowned with a wreath by the hand of the Father and a dove (Raw, 78–149). In the East, Russian iconographer Andrei Rublev (d. 1430) gave the world its most famous and enduring picture of the Trinity in his icon of the three angels sitting at table as guests of Abraham and Sarah.

Feminine representations of the Trinity were rare, but not totally absent. The twelfth-century mystic Hildegard of Bingen records an image of a circle of rays with the Holy Spirit in the form of a woman in the center. From the Middle Ages a unique representation found in a church in Urschalling, Bavaria, shows the Trinity as two men, one with dark beard and one with white, with a young woman between them representing the Spirit. A seventeenth-century painting, commissioned for a Black Forest church, even depicts a totally female Trinity—three seated women clothed in bright colors (Moltmann-Wendel, 46–103).

Theological and Political Message of Images

This rich, if sparse, tradition of various imagery for the Trinity is not known to most Christians. For the architects of theology have persistently presented a trinitarian model of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, with the most common visual representation being two bearded white males and a dove. This predominant image asserts a powerful theological message about the identity of God. In addition to masculinity, this image reflects a static, remote triune God who watches the world and its affairs from a distance, granting mercy, passing judgment, or bestowing favors on the humans struggling for life on earth, far beneath the heavenly throne. The enthroned, all powerful king and his prince son, seated under the insignificant white dove, manifest royal authority as monarch, judge, and benefactor for the world below. Furthermore, they are represented as white European males, thus unabashedly proclaiming the divinity and superiority of the white race.

This sovereign Trinity exerts kingly power and does not tolerate any challenges to authority. On the other hand, this God is a persuasive and beneficial ally for men seeking power and dominion on earth. History confirms that human rulers have assumed that the heavenly monarch, like earthly kings, supports and awards violent military campaigns to win more subjects and more territory for his kingdom on earth. At the same time this king is considered to have little concern for the violence perpetrated on the so-called unbelievers who supposedly deserve the punishment given to them by the king’s loyal subjects.

This pervasive image of the Trinity continues to influence the faith and behavior of Christian men and women today. Either consciously or unconsciously
the images we carry of God determine the manner of our relationship with God and one another. The image of the heavenly king and his son portrays as divine the qualities of power, strength, domination, might, authority, control, prestige, superiority. Those humans who can identify with the bearded white king or who see themselves as other sons of the king, attempt to incorporate these divine qualities into their own life. At the same time they often seek their appropriate place of power in this world and appeal to this God to legitimize their authority. For those persons who cannot identify with this king or his princely son (because of sex, race, or class), the virtues of humility, meekness, obedience, silence, submissiveness, and passivity are expected and even demanded—not only toward the heavenly king but also toward those humans who claim to be his earthly representatives.

The suspicion arises that the predominance of this imperial image of the Trinity for hundreds of years may have been inspired by political motivation. In Eurocentric cultures where Christianity has been the most successful, it is not difficult to find evidence that some segments of this culture have benefited from promoting this image to the exclusion of other images. One might surmise that this image was not promulgated mainly as pious art for religious inspiration but to serve another purpose, more closely allied to the aggrandizement of human power and earthly kingdoms. “The idea of a divine monarchy, projected out of the earthly monarch, was used to justify all kinds of hierarchy and domination: religious, moral, sexual, political” (LaCugna, 1991, 393). Images, especially those of a religious nature, are expected to express the truth of reality, but whose truth do they represent? Perhaps the answer to this lies in a further question: Does one class of a culture reap specific benefits from a particular religious image more than other classes do?

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The Power of Images

An objection might be raised that these visual and verbal images do not actually have such a powerful impact on the ordinary person’s understanding of God and God’s relationship with humanity. Yet, recently in an adult education situation, an elderly woman asked me in all sincerity, “Is God the Father
really a heavenly male with a long white beard?” Her intuition told her this could not be so, but this is the image she had heard/read/seen since youth in catechisms and biblical art. In another adult education class I taught a few years ago, I explained that God could be referred to as “She” as well as “He.” One woman got up from her chair, and with alarm said, “I could never do that. What if he doesn’t like it.” She walked out the door and never came back to class. The dominant masculine image had infiltrated her religious understanding and was total reality to her.

Another illustration on the influence of images comes to my mind from an occasion when I was attending Mass in my friend’s parish church a couple of years ago. The youth group had just returned from an experience of evangelization in Central America, where they used song and drama to portray the Christian message. They wanted to share one of their pantomimes with the parish that day. There were five actors, two boys and three girls, who would represent the five characters of Jesus, an innocent youth and the temptations of the world, the flesh, and the devil. My fears were verified when the three girls played the parts of the three tempters, while the boys represented Jesus and innocence. The most painful aspect of this experience for me was that no one in the parish noticed the underlying message for the girls and women. Elizabeth Johnson explains the theory working behind these examples: “The evocative power of the deeply masculinized symbol [of the Trinity] points implicitly to an essential divine maleness.” This has the “effect of casting men into the role of God while women stand as dependent and sinful humanity” (Johnson, 193), not to mention as the devil herself.

From these and other experiences, I can verify that images of God have a powerful and often unconscious influence on our faith and praxis. Margaret Miles provides an in-depth study on the history of Christianity as revealed through visual images. Miles found that the study of images through the centuries supplements the historical and theological texts and provides a new access to the religious ideas, attitudes, and values of ordinary folks. By analyzing the visual images used in worship spaces, insights can be gained into the religious world. “We must reconstruct on the evidence of the images themselves the spectrum of messages that were likely to be received by the worshipers who lived with them” (Miles, 7).
A more focused study by David Morgan reveals the impact on people of the popular painting *Head of Christ* by Warner Sallman. As a result of his study he claims, “I will argue that the act of looking itself contributes to religious formation and, indeed, constitutes a powerful practice of belief” (Morgan, 3). By looking at religious pictures people claimed they felt the presence of God, received comfort, strength, and courage, felt called to pray, and were confirmed in their concept of God. The author concluded that the religious world of people is constructed by images. “Language and vision, word and image, text and picture are in fact deeply enmeshed and collaborate powerfully in assembling our sense of the real” (Ibid., 9). A visual image often seems to embody the real presence of God for the viewers and infiltrates into their faith and practice. Morgan also discovered that as an image becomes anchored in the mind, it influences the way a biblical text is interpreted, and then the interpretation of the text confirms the pre-existing image.

In regard to visualizing God, the process works in this way: a picture of a kingly God on a throne is presented to illustrate the words, “Our Father who art in heaven,” and these words in turn confirm the image of God seated majestically on a throne in what is pictured as heaven. Morgan explains the process:

This is a powerful means of corroborating religious belief because it naturalizes the biblical text—or what believers take to be the text, but is actually their preconception of what the text itself means. What we come around to in the hermeneutical circle is the dogma, church practice, social order, and conceptions of gender, authority, and race that tell believers what the Bible means. These *pre-texts* constitute the ideological structures that guide the believer’s reading of the Bible and predispose him or her to interpret it in a particular way (140).

**Necessity of Human Images for God**

If verbal and visual images can be so perilous to God and humans, should all images be abolished in a new iconoclasm? That would be impossible according to David Freedberg, for “whether we have an image before us or not, the mind can only grasp the invisible by means of, or with reference to, the visible. . . . Thus we form images in our mind from our memories or from some image before us. The mind has no choice” (Freedberg, 191). If images are essential to human understanding, even of the divinity, then it seems many more images are needed to represent the fullness of the Trinity. If we truly believe Genesis 1:27 that both male and female were created in God’s image and likeness, then God must be represented by both the masculine and the feminine. If all the peoples on this earth
are created in God's image, then representations of God must not be limited to white-skinned figures.

An escape from this dilemma of representation could be found by the use of only inanimate images for God, such as light, energy, rock, wind. These are certainly available to us from Scripture itself, yet Sallie McFague presents two excellent reasons to continue using the image of humanity. The first reason is that God was incarnated in humanity, with Jesus being the prime image of God. The second is that humans, male and female together, do reflect the divine image. “We were made in the image of God (Gen. 3:27), so we now, with the model of Jesus, have further support for imagining God in our image, the image of persons” (McFague, 1982, 20).

**A New Down-to-Earth Image**

Since images are essential to the human thought process and to the Christian sacramental view of reality, I suggest that we need to consider new visual and verbal images to replace the distant monarchy. We need an image which brings a loving, caring, relational God to earth, perhaps an image that depicts the Trinity walking among us, as Genesis 3:8 portrays God “walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze.” A new portrayal of the Trinity (to be created or to be discovered in the archives of the world) could be similar to the famous icon of Andrei Rublev which features three angelic figures sitting at table as guests of Abraham and Sarah. The three figures are arranged around the table non-hierarchically, are not specifically masculine in form, and invite participation. The three angels, understood to represent the Trinity, invite the viewer to sit at table with them, to dine with them, to share their meal, to be in relationship.

To return to my introductory remarks, one example I would propose for consideration for a new image of the Trinity would be (or would closely resemble) the painting of *The Gleaners*. In this harvest scene the three stooped, walking figures are presumably women peasants, but their sexuality, age, and race are not pronounced since the figures are stooped and their faces do not show. These gleaners, wearing the simple garb of peasants, reach to the earth to gather grain that the harvesters have left behind. They value the insignificant, the negligible, the leftovers not considered profitable by those who reaped the choice portions of the harvest ahead of them.

This image of the Trinity gleaning among us on our earth would invite us into a dynamic, vibrant, working relationship with God, who chooses to walk with us in our daily lives. Rather than sitting on a jeweled throne in the distant sky, wearing spotless royal robes akin to the outmoded kings of the earth, God takes up residence on earth, even tenting among us according to the Gospel of John, “The Word became flesh and set his tent among us” (John 1:14). God works, cries,
laughs with humanity, day in, day out, at office, school, sick bed, kitchen sink, dinner table, field. We do not struggle alone but always in companionship with God, who desires to share our whole life with us.

The three gleaners also invite us to become gleaners, to come into the field with them, to walk and work with them, to gather the valuable resources of the earth bit by bit in order to provide bread for all humanity. The God who cares passionately for the people of the earth, provides for us the fruit of the earth, has also promised: “I will feed you with the finest of wheat” (Ps 81:16). The God of Jesus is like a woman taking yeast and mixing it in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened and ready to be baked (Matt 13:33). God gathers the grain, bakes bread, and blesses, breaks, and distributes it at the Eucharist. God is busy gleaning side by side with us each day so that all children of earth may be fed with daily bread for body and soul. “I am the bread of life. This is the bread that comes down from heaven for [you] to eat and never die” (John 6:33,50).

This image of the Divine Gleaners also speaks to the current, urgent concern for the health and preservation of the environment of our earth. It is common knowledge that the natural resources of our earth are being exploited for the sake of financial profit. Air, land, and water are polluted by the careless disposal of wastes, from the small individual littering of garbage to the corporate dumping of toxic products. The God on the distant throne seems to be too preoccupied or too distant to be concerned. But the Gleaner God stoops with us (emphasis on
with us) to search for unexploded land mines, to pick up discarded trash, to plant flowers in the cracks of cement, to raise a hand to stop the progress of the bulldozers, to heal the wounds of the earth.

The Gleaner God is the divine administrator of justice who expects us to care for the neglected children, the homeless aged, the unemployed welfare mothers and fathers who live on the peripheries of society, on the edge of the field of plenty. “When you reap the harvest in your field and overlook a sheaf there, you shall not go back to get it; let it be for the alien, the orphan or the widow, that the Lord, your God, may bless you in all your undertakings” (Deut 24:19). God is the advocate of those who can find no human advocate, the healer who reaches out to soothe the wounded heart, the listener who hears the feeble voice of the refugee, the one who keeps vigil through the night with the dying.

The Gleaner God walks quietly and softly at our side, asking us to tread lightly upon our earth which sustains us, to revere what it surrenders for our use, and to bless it gratefully with our hands. If this image of God were imbedded in our minds and hearts, we would not dare continue the multiplication of lethal weapons, the greedy exploitation of the treasures of our planet, or the oppression and domination of the weak with whom God walks.

With this proposal for new images of the Trinity I am not intending to address the refined points of trinitarian theology, with all of its carefully crafted distinctions. I would remind those who may object that The Gleaners does not adequately represent Trinitarian theology, that surely two men and a dove are no improvement. But just as that image supposedly served a purpose in its time, other more meaningful images can take its place in a new time. The role of a new image would be to assist the belief of people who are struggling to find and claim a faith for themselves.

**Theo-Fantasy to the Rescue**

Perhaps what I am proposing with the image of The Gleaners is what Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel calls theo-fantasy. She remarks that women, and I would add many men too, often find more meaning in their imaginations than in
the scholastic tradition and language of theology. “For us, therefore, theo-fantasy takes its place alongside theo-logy and frequently reexcavates the buried sources” (Moltmann-Wendel, 119). Theology has been primarily the work of scholastics who have focused on their limited knowledge and experiences as well as the nuances of the written word, whereas life is more rich and colorful than any theological treatise.

Theo-fantasy calls upon the gift of human imagination to bring to our awareness those aspects of God that can easily slip unobserved between the planks of ponderous theological words. Theo-fantasy awakens our mind to glimpse new aspects of God in all of God’s wondrous creation and even in human creation, including art. “Sometimes we recognize that artworks have the capacity to transform the structures of our thought, to turn things upside down and literally to change the way we see” (Pattenden, 34).

Since we have become accustomed to seeing the Trinity mainly in one artistic form, that form needs to be turned upside down and inside out to inspire us with fresh insights into the unfathomable and unlimited mystery of God. Changing the way we see and consequently the way we understand and assimilate doctrine will enrich our relationship with God. As LaCugna reminds us, doctrine must insert God into our daily lives, rather than imprison God in an intradivine realm. “Preaching and pastoral practice will have to fight a constant battle to convince us, to provide assurances, to make the case that God is indeed present among us, does indeed care for us, will indeed hear our prayer, and will be lovingly disposed to respond (LaCugna, 1991, 411). After all, deepening our relationship with God is the purpose of our religious images as well as the doctrines they attempt to illustrate.

References


