

The Feminine Face of God



One day, as I was walking in Nakuru town, in Kenya, I came upon two of our diocesan priests, Peter Kairo and Francis Gichia. Both are of the same tribe and Kikuyu is their mother tongue. Their primary school education would have been done in Kiswahili, the national language of Kenya, and their secondary education would have been through the medium of English. But they were conversing animatedly in English. I found this amusing and asked, *“Why are you not speaking in Kikuyu, or even in Kiswahili?”* Peter smiled and said, *“Because what we are talking about (a complex theological issue) cannot be discussed in Kikuyu or Kiswahili. These languages don’t have the necessary vocab or ideas.”*

Even in Greek, a language finely honed to treat of philosophical and theological concepts, scholars have to dance among four different “dialects” to wrestle with the notion of God: historians of religion have to use Evolutionary language to trace the development of our thinking about God; teachers use parabolic/analogical/metaphorical language (God is LIKE...); theologians (in their hubris) use cataphatic language (God IS...); while mystics employ Apophatic language (God is NOT...).

Let me use another template to illustrate the issue: since Homo Sapiens Sapiens developed human speech 50,000 years ago, we have gone through four distinct phases in our thinking about the gods and our relationships to them. First, all we could do was speak ABOUT them (like fans discussing the latest gossip on a celebrity whom they would never meet). This might be called the era of the theologians. But this quickly disintegrates into endless speculation e.g., “*How many angels can dance on the head of a pin?*” Second came the time when we began to speak TO the gods. This was the era of the priests, who invented all kinds of prayers and sacrifices and rituals to gain a hearing for themselves and their flock. The shadow side of this is that it soon becomes an arm-wrestling with god, like bargain hunters. This is how Abraham acted as he pleaded for the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah. Third was when individuals claimed to represent the gods. They were called prophets (a Greek word which means, “to speak on behalf of.”) The dark underbelly of this era is autocratic, infallible popes and self-appointed gurus. I believe that we are now in the fourth era, the era of the mystics, in which each individual can speak AS god.

The invitation of this era is to look at where we’ve come from and acknowledge that it was appropriate that we should crawl before we could walk, but that now we are meant to fly. We’ve worked our way through polytheism and its plethora of: portfolio gods (of love, of war, of agriculture...), regional gods (responsible for particular chunks of real estate) and tribal gods (nomadic, like their dependents.) We then embraced a monotheism which evolved through its dogmatic, fundamentalist, intolerant and genocidal stages, until Jesus proposed a God who was Abwon (daddy or “birthing

principle of the universe.”) Is it now time to change the nomenclature and greet God as Ima (mama or the feminine face of Source)?

I suggest that we have to dance between the mystical and the metaphorical. God is radically beyond categories, including gender, but we can *experience* God, and we do relate to God; and in order to be able to share these experiences and speak of our relationship we are forced to use metaphors. So we must shift both mindset (God is *not* a person and therefore does not have gender) and metaphor (if we must articulate our experiences and consciously forge a relationship with Source, it is now time to begin using feminine images.)

Let me expand a little on that. Sex and gender are very different. One's sex is either female or male and has to do with biological differences (internal and external primary and secondary sexual organs, hormones and chromosomes.) Gender is either feminine or masculine and has to do with *culturally assigned* roles. Therefore woman = female sex + feminine social roles, and man = male sex + masculine social roles.

Sometimes nature itself gets a little confused. Klinefelter's syndrome is when a male, instead of having XY chromosomes, has XXY or XXYY. Such a male will be sterile, have small testicles and enlarged breasts. Turner's syndrome is when a female, instead of having XX chromosomes, has only one X, and is simply X0. In such a female, the sex organs do not mature and she, too, is sterile.

Now what does this have to do with God? Well, probably very few people today believe that God has sexual organs or chromosomes; but we continue to attribute gender to God i.e., Father. But sexual- and gender-specific images tend to stereotype spiritual attributes and lock God into being a person like us - albeit a Super-person. But

God is *not* a person and, therefore, is neither female nor male. So how can we use images of God that soften us into compassion while still realizing that they are merely metaphors? I believe the answer lies in switching out of gender-specific traits. The good news is that we don't have to invent new terms. Taoism did that for us 2,600 years ago, with its notion of Yin and Yang.

Each one of us has both Yin and Yang traits. I'll give a partial, sample listing of these traits later in this essay. And the ideal mix comes in three flavors: first, each one of us should be in some kind of balance between these qualities; second, it is appropriate, on occasion, to lean toward one side; and, third, when we operate as a team, it is OK for some people to hold more Yin and others to hold more of the Yang energy.

It is important to realize that Yin is not the same as feminine and that Yang is not to be confused with masculine. These terms are not gender-identified. Neither does Yin mean "the good guys" or Yang mean "the bad guys"; rather the line runs through each person. Both women and men can err by having too much Yin or too much Yang.

Magdalene was not great because she was all Yin, but because she was in balance; Jesus was not great because he was all Yang, but because he was in balance. The Serenity Prayer got it right: "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change (Yin energy); the courage to change the things I can (Yang energy); and the wisdom to know the difference (balance.)"

So the real invitation is to shift our state of consciousness. I'm going to invent a term and then define it: *Christa consciousness* is the female embodiment of a fully balanced Yin/Yang avatar (Christ consciousness is the male embodiment of a fully

balanced Yin/Yang avatar.) Such a female embodiment was called Kwan Yin (“she who hearkens to the cries of the world”) in Mahayana Buddhism; she was called Tara in Tibetan Buddhism; in Christianity she is known as Mary, the Virgin-mother; in the Egyptian Mysteries she is known as Isis; and in Hinduism she goes by four names, each associated with her consort: Shakti wife of Vishnu, Parvati wife of Shiva, Radha wife of Krishna and Sita wife of Rama.

As we shift images and metaphors for God in order to ease ourselves seamlessly and peacefully into the next phase of our global spirituality, it is vitally important that it not be done in an angry, reactionary mode against the patriarchy. Our world has a surfeit of violence; we have fed the morphogenetic field of rage for thousands of years. It is important to remember that each of us has had lifetimes as women and lifetimes as men. Getting identified with my present sex and gender and buying into its particular prejudices is a recipe for further violence in our times and would only lead to a perpetual oscillation between two forms of anger. The greatness of Jesus’ mother was not that she railed against the inhumanity of Rome or the hypocrisy of Jerusalem, but that she was filled with compassion for all who are trapped in the illusions of samsara.

So how do we hold this paradox: on the one hand, God is not a person and therefore neither a male nor a female; on the other hand we need different, softer images for our experiences and relationship with Source. Eventually, like the adherents of Formless Mysticism, we will outgrow all images and all metaphors for Source and simply reside in the experiences themselves. On the road to that level of mysticism, however, it behooves us to switch images. We are currently caught in male images; the

next phase is to favor female images; then will come the era of integrated images (Yin and Yang); and, finally, will come the time when we will transcend all images.

And even though we know that all images are imaginary, images can have huge *practical* benefits. Metaphors create memes, memes circumscribe what experiences we can have, and our experiences determine what we take to be “reality.” And whatever our reality model is, the world will adapt itself, in our perceptions, in order to support and confirm that reality model. Believing is seeing!

Let me show just how powerful and practical imagination can be. I lived on the equator for 14 years. Literally. I crossed it several times each day as I went about my priestly duties in Kenya. And I can assure you that there is no bump on the road where the equator passes, because the equator has no physical “real” existence. It is a mental construct. But it has tremendous *practical applications*. It allows us to construct an equally imaginary global grid system that makes it possible for us to pinpoint, with extraordinary accuracy, any location on the planet. It’s the basic GPS instrument.

Similarly, in mathematics, “iota” or “the square root of minus one” does not exist in the real world. It is a mental construct. No less a prodigy than Rene Descartes derided such an idea as “imaginary numbers.” Yet, today, they form the basis of electromagnetism, fluid dynamics and quantum mechanics.

This then is the point of using images of God (as a stage of or evolution into mysticism.) Though, like the equator and iota, all images of God are purely imaginary, they have very practical applications. In fact each era of history has largely been fashioned by our belief in and usage of these images. And the patriarchal images have

led to some great technological advances - and to some perilous consequences as well.
It is high time to shift images toward more feminine and more integrated ones.

These, I believe, are the steps we must take as we listen to Spirit: from masculine to feminine images; then from feminine to integrated images; and, finally, from integrated images to imageless union with Source.

I wish to end this essay with the partial list of Yin and Yang attributes that I promised earlier; and with some simple exercises to get you started on your own journey into Formless Mysticism.

Bon voyage!

Namasté,

Tír na nÓg
September 2012

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Seán". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal stroke extending to the left.

Partial list of Yin and Yang Attributes.

#	Yin Attributes	Yang Attributes
1	Artistic	Technical
2	Receptive	Active
3	Mercy-focused	Justice-focused
4	Soft	Hard
5	Right brain	Left brain
6	Diffuse	Directed
7	Wide angle	Narrow focus
8	Intuitive	Rational
9	Emotional	Logical
10	Humble	Confident
11	Related	Independent
12	Loving	Powerful
13	Compassionate	Courageous
14	Dark	Light
15	Nurturing	Protective
16	Tender love	Tough love
17	Patient	Task oriented
18	Considerate	Assertive
19	Cooperative	Competitive
20	Community oriented	Individuated

Self-assessment

For each **Yin** attribute in the list above give yourself a score (between 0 and 5) and then total your **Yin** energy.

For each **Yang** attribute in the list above give yourself a score (between 0 and 5) and then total your **Yang** energy.

Now compare your two totals to see how you **balance**

Sample Table of Yin and Yang Energies

#	Yin	Yang	Comment
A	100	0	Far too much Yin
B	75	25	Too much Yin
C	50	50	Good balance
D	25	75	Too much Yang
E	0	100	Far too much Yang

Some Other Exercises

First Set

Choose a letter (A, B, C, D or E) from the **Sample Table** above that, in your opinion, best describes the energy of each of the systems in the list below.

- US politics
- The Roman Catholic Church
- Corporate Capitalism
- Your family of origin
- Yourself, on average

Second Set

Pick a significant event from your **past** and choose a letter (A, B, C, D or E) from the **Sample Table** above that best describes how you handled it.

- If you had been more in balance how would you have handled it?

Pick a **recent** significant event and choose a letter (A, B, C, D or E) from the **Sample Table** above that best describes how you handled it.

- If you had been more in balance how would you have handled it?

Third Set

Pick a situation in which it would be appropriate to be more Yin than Yang

Pick a situation in which it would be appropriate to be more Yang than Yin

May God continue to hold you tenderly in the hollow of Her hand.