

WAYS OF RELATING

By SARA MAITLAND

GOSSIP sb. (GOD + sibb—skin, related).

1. One who has contracted a spiritual affinity with another by acting as sponsor at a baptism. 2. A familiar acquaintance, friend or chum. Formerly applied to both sexes, now only to women; and *esp.* applied to a woman's female friends invited to be present at a childbirth. 3. A person, mostly a woman, of light and trifling character, *esp.* one who delights in idle talk, a newsmonger, a tattler. 4. The conversation of such a person, idle talk, trifling or groundless rumour; tittle-tattle.

GOSSIP vb. To talk idly, mostly about other people's affairs; to go about tattling.

Oxford English Dictionary

(I was twenty-seven hours in labour with my first child. The people, not all of them women as it happened, who talked me and held me through that laborious time were not of 'light and trifling character', thank God, but they and I contracted there a spiritual affinity which I will not see debased.)

I DID NOT CHOOSE the title of this paper; it was a pure gift. 'Relating' has two meanings: it signifies both 'connecting' and 'telling'. This is not just a dictionary game. It is important to be as aware as possible that the intricacies of language open and close doors, throw coloured balls sparkling in the air, juggle, trick, manipulate and create reality. ('God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light'.) The language we have determines quite profoundly what we can think, imagine, create, and even feel. We are dependent, when it comes to relating (even to and about the eternal), on these socially constructed, delusive ephemera—words, sentences, gestures, all dense with history, with ideologies of dominance, with confusion, with aloneness and with structured responses. The *Word* became flesh and dwelt among us; more fool God.

Right now I had better make clear that I am neither a theologian nor a linguist. I am a writer and a Christian. However this does mean that I have to look, quite often, at the theory that underpins and describes both these activities—linguistics and theology. In

both I am, in the literal sense of the word, an amateur—a lover. As lover I cannot help wanting both theology and linguistics to relate to me more closely, to be more sensual, more responsive, more open, more ready to be wooed and played with. This paper is an open attempt to seduce them both, though it may well end up as flirting.

I am also a feminist: to all questions whatsoever I bring my sense of myself as a woman—which is not primarily a biological definition, but a social and historical one, constructed through relating. Gender is a powerful social and psychological determinant, so I might as well know it. I am white and middle-class and educationally privileged and european and female. I have to work hard on not deluding myself that these are either neutral or universal. They are my perspectives and consciously or unconsciously they mediate all my ways of relating. It is only by bringing them into consciousness, however, that I can hope to explore the whole question of relating with anything like the joy and hope that are appropriate.

Alla Bozarth Campbell, who is perhaps as near as the christian feminist movement gets to a traditional mystic of our own, describes this shared realization thus:

As I came to own and accept my own womanhood as a gift from God, bringing my own new value for the female side of life into prayer, I experienced a kind of inward leaping which was ecstatically physical as well as spiritual; an inward bodily leaping that made me feel God in my nerves and blood and deep down in my bone marrow as in my emotions and my intellect.

I was not able to approach God with this kind of engagement until I began to open up my prayer life to the feminine aspects of God, and to celebrate my own femaleness in that aspect. And I didn't suspect the wholeness I missed until I began to experience it . . . I don't suggest that this process is possible only for women. I only know that I came to it self-consciously as a woman, open to deeper discovery of my own nature through closer contact with the nature of God . . . Now I know with my whole being that I am connected with God . . . and that the realization of this connection is the reason for which I was born.¹

What is not named does not exist—conceptually: limits on language really are limits on thought, and on the capacity to act. An amazing, magical thing happens to small children when they

first learn to speak, which proves the point that I am trying to make. It is not just that they learn to communicate, though that is exciting enough. There is something more: an explosion of mind which is geometric rather than arithmetic. They can, with the power of words, conceptualize and project and memorize and manipulate and co-operate in an entirely new way.

Christianity has always acknowledged this central truth, drawn from our Jewish roots. God is veiled from sight and known in and by words, by god-speaking. 'In the beginning was the Word and the Word was God'. Our faith is in 'the Word incarnate', that which came from the mouth of God and took flesh. God and god-speaking are co-eternal and inseparable. The Word is our primary and fundamental way of relating to God. Sacramentalists of all persuasions believe that for validity you need the right rite—the right words—as well as the right intention and the right matter. Protestantism, in stressing the authority of the bible and the centrality of preaching, is saying the same thing. It is not just that words have some intrinsic magical power, because precision of meaning has always been stressed in the Christian tradition—mumbo-jumbo, 'vain repetition', incantation have always been frowned upon. Paul, for instance, insists that no-one should speak in tongues unless there is an interpreter available. When we are accused of 'playing word games' (from condemning Arianism down to 'non-sexist liturgy') we should stand up proudly and delight in it; playing with the Word is a primary obligation.

Whilst talking about word games I think it is worth mentioning one of the rules: people seem to have an extraordinary amount of difficulty with symbolic language ('It's only a symbol' they say. What more in heaven's name should or could it be?). All the language we use for God is metaphorical (even the word God): God, we know from common sense as well as the tradition, is 'without qualities' (physical, mental or material attributes of any kind whatsoever)—you cannot say anything concrete about God because 'qualities' cannot exist except in the concrete realm of time and space. But since we need (and yearn and long) to speak of the unspeakable we use metaphors, images, symbolic terms. So far so good, but language is sneaky; if the image is a strong one it always demonstrates a tendency to 'drift' into 'reality'. And this is marked in Christianity because we do have a faith grounded in the materiality of time and space; a weakness for the word as well as a strength in relating to it. It is vital, as the words are juggled

about, to keep a grip on the fact that there are no universal metaphors—that stretch through all time, all people, all social modes, that transcend the social reality that generated them.

Changes in social reality change the meaning of images. The current scientific model for example affects the content of christian imagery. When Aquinas spoke of God as Father/Creator he was basing his metaphor not just on the social dominance of maleness, but also on a specific biology *in which we no longer believe*: that male sperm contained the complete and perfect living child and the woman's body provided nothing but a growing place for it. God as male, impregnating nature as female made good—no, beautiful—image sense, but it does not any more. If we look at the God/nature, male/female imagery in any depth at all it is patently rubbish and moreover creates all sorts of heretical complications in the light of *our* scientific model. Changed gender-roles, the discovery of the non-geocentric universe, the 'invention' of the psyche by the post-enlightenment nineteenth-century, evolutionary theory—all change the implicit meaning of symbols. Even the fact that shepherds now drive their sheep from behind and use dogs instead of leading them from the front means that the image of Jesus as the good shepherd has a different emotional content. This is true of *all* the ways we relate to or about God. They are all metaphors and have therefore no abstracted eternal verity.

The women's movement (possibly because of its middle-class and intellectual bias) has taken up the issue of language more seriously and directly than most other liberation movements. (As the longest and oldest liberation movement still present in the west, Christianity ought to be slightly ashamed about this.) What we have come up with is a series of exposures, some of which are worth illustrating.

(a) The exposure of *exclusion*, or absence—women's experiences have been excluded from language and therefore are not known to exist.

(b) The exposure of *denigration*—where women's experiences are named they are not valued. 'Gossip' is a good example of this, but there a thousand others, most easily seen in words that are grammatically equivalent but affectually not: master and mistress; sissy and tom-boy; bachelor and spinster.

(c) The exposure of *ambiguity*. (This is especially noticeable in English.) The obvious example is the word 'man' which is supposed to carry two *inherently contradictory* meanings, both 'any member of

the human species' and 'any member of the human species who is not female'.

(d) But the most important exposure is the exposure of *effect*. Language is not neutral, it informs and creates concepts and actions, it is 'owned' by the dominant ideology of its time. All language is value-laden; and access to changing it and controlling its values is in the hands of certain social groups. The word 'man', for example, does not just make one more likely to think of a male person than a female person; it does not merely subsume the female to the point of disappearance. It also comes with an affectual sub-text, a hidden agenda of meaning. In 1972 two american sociologists did a tidy little piece of research: they asked three hundred students to create collages from magazine pictures to illustrate certain themes. Half were assigned the theme using the word 'man': Industrial Man, Political Man, and so on, and half were given the same themes differently expressed: Industrial Life, Political Behaviour, Society. Not only did the group with the word 'man' in their titles show fewer pictures of women and children; they also showed that the word 'man' induced images of power and dominance. For example:

Social Man was portrayed as a sophisticated, white, party-going male (half to two-thirds of the pictures included the consumption of alcohol) . . . while Society involved scenes of social disruption and protest with a sub-theme of co-operation among people.²

If we relate to God and each other through exclusively male images we must remember that we are naming holiness as a 'sophisticated white party-goer'.

The point about all this is that when women say there are other ways of relating to or about God, they are not merely talking about making themselves feel better, or claiming their own holiness (though both these things seem highly desirable to me); we are primarily trying to wrest the 'ownership' of God away from a discourse of dominance and onto the side of 'co-operation among people'. Rosemary Ruether suggests that:

It is not just that God is imaged as male, but as male warrior élite. God is not imaged as black male garbage collector either. It is important to keep a hold on this connection.³

In the light of this let me look for a moment at some of the ways

we do relate God in the tradition and what this may mean.

There are the names of God that are based on the images of personal relationship. God as father, as brother, as husband (not always to the woman as bride/wife; sometimes to a man's soul, sometimes to the whole Church). Father is perhaps the most important image here, because it is so central to the whole christian tradition and was recorded as an instruction of Jesus—'When you pray, say Father'. There are a lot of ways you can relate to this naming. Firstly you can criticize it. It is biologically and specifically masculist. It is also not very close to present day experience if what we are trying to express is the tender and nurturing qualities of God; the constant, and constantly loving carefulness. Very few children growing up in Britain today have much experience of their fathers in this role. I think it is interesting that the concept of the first person of the Trinity as increasingly distant, judgemental and punitive, with a newer focus on Mary as Mother and Jesus as friend and brother, grew up in Europe at almost exactly the same time as the educated writing and thinking people were becoming urbanized—that is, their father's work and family-life were being separated; the image changed content.⁴ Now these ideas about God's nurturance and fondness might be better related to the image 'Mother'. The danger here is that this might suggest that tender nurturing was somehow a female characteristic, and that it was less incumbent on men to develop it. If we wish men to grow up into decent nurturing human beings we should be careful.

The really positive content of mother imagery, it seems to me, is, in fact rather more basic. 'Mother' in our society really does express 'the person with whom the buck stops'. Now that is something we really do want to say about God—and of course in our desire to claim our autonomy from our mothers we also want to say that God, like a good mother, is one who hands the buck back again to the people who try to pass it on. Another use of 'mother' is, of course, about giving birth; and this is one that has something particular to say to Christians. Birthing is the creating of new life through hard work (labour) and blood. Of course men do create life, just as much as women do, and must be held to their responsibility for this (I have no wish to swap a thomistic myth for a 'separatist feminist' myth); but they do it differently—in joy and delight. 'God said "Let there be light" and there was light', seems a lovely image of ejaculatory creation. But God also

brought new life, gospel life to birth, stretched out for hours on the Cross, autonomy removed by aggressive experts, the eternal Word reduced to wordless cries, bleeding down into the dark, overwhelmed by the sense of desolation, the doubt as to how much more you can put up with. And afterwards the joy, the new life, the sense of mystery and distance. It seems that the creative birthing of God as expressed in Christ's passion (and reiterated in the rituals of baptism) can be given a deeper relating if we can learn to hear as holy the bodily experiences of women, and trust the metaphor of God as mother.

Moreover if we liberate our relating with God to a rather desperate attempt to wring tenderness out of stone, we close our eyes to an image of Father which cannot in our society (because of the oppression of women, and their subjugation within the home) be properly carried by the name Mother. Fatherhood is, partly and importantly, that which frees one from childhood and the private and unites one with the social and the historical. We all have to forge our identities over against the mother and her loving; the good father is one who enables this process (ideally by taking on the weight of her caring, and thus liberating both child and mother from the burden of it).

I am trying to suggest that because of the social relationship of word and meaning there is a deep complexity in the use of mother/father imagery which cannot be put right while we hold that God is primarily one or the other, eternally and outside of a social understanding of how the two relate to each other and to their children within the real material context.

While I am at this point I would like to mention very briefly that it is curious how little the image of God as child is allowed to surface. There is the child who will *play* for ever with us. ('Then I was at God's side each day, God's darling and delight; playing in the presence continually, playing on the earth when it was made',⁵ says *Sophia* who is the wisdom of God, who is God). However, equally there is the one who wakes us in the night with demands for attention when we would rather be asleep, forever reminding us of the disciplined necessities of love; and also of the great divine yearning and need to be loved. Again I suspect the fullness of this image has not flowered among us precisely because child-care and children themselves have been given such a low status compared with the glorious work of abstracting and rationalizing. Adoptionism however has been named as a heresy: the neo-natal child at

Bethlehem is where 'the fullness of God is pleased to dwell' just as much as in the miracle-working teacher.

Space requires me to pass swiftly through the non-personal images for God and how they can bring us into better ways of relating. It is an androcentric as well as a sexist culture which has named God in its own image. Women have had their noses so rubbed in the dust of nature that we often feel like popping up to point out that Jesus frequently chose non-personal namings for himself—the Way, the Truth, the Resurrection, the Vine. The created order and its processes are as much created of God as we are, and we might be brought into a more just relationship by remembering to image as rock and as growth, as order in the seasons and as chaos in the atom.

But I want to speak a little about the well-known feminist claim that God cannot be imaged at all satisfactorily in the essentialist, noun-based way that has usually been employed. There is also a whole, and perfectly traditional, language of God as movement; God as verb. For people in power, an eternal substantive, an eternal noun and eternal object has a clear purpose, because an eternal object—however constructed—obviously stands over against transformation and radical change. Women, with other oppressed groups, need to relate to God as verb, as process, as act because we see the need for that transformation—we have felt it in our own experience. The God of the Hebrews is not only 'the Lord of Armies' but also 'I AM', a pure verb of being-ness. We want to go further than this, finding ways of relating God not just as the verb of being, but as *active* verb too. Bernard of Clairvaux put this more clearly than I can when he described the Holy Spirit as the passionate kiss between the Father and the Son. Although you construe 'kiss' as a noun, it is really a verb, because the kiss only exists in the act of kissing. There is a tension—I mean that as a healthy thing—always between God transcendent and God immanent. Those two points are filled, joined, spilling over with God as mediator. God is the mediator of God, and God is also the mediation. Likewise when we talk of the God of History we do not just mean that God controls history from *outside*, but also that God is the process of history, and we are therefore liberated to engage with that process in the knowledge that we are made in God's image. Or as Yeats so precisely asks, 'How can you tell the dancer from the dance?'

It always seems to me interesting that, in the biblical tradition,

whenever you find God described as verb, as movement or process, you tend to get grammatically feminine forms allowing personification. Both *Ruach* (the spirit of God in creation) and *Sophia* (the wisdom of God in action) are feminine. And women from the women's movement can tell that sisterhood is a process, not a substance; and that the verb of sisterhood is a way of relating that is holy.

I do not believe, finally, that women have ontological skills, knowledge or anything else that makes them essentially different from men. To believe that is to fly in the face of known facts (women can be as war-like as any men when they get the chance; men can be as tender and nurturing as any women if they have to be), and to question our redemption through the Incarnation (for if God could not assume the whole of humanity in Christ, then we are not saved). I do believe that women, through the mediation of language and beyond it, have a different experience of the world, different ways of relating to it, and the immensity of God requires all experience to be brought to bear on the task of living out and mediating God's love and justice. I have a profound sense that at some deep level it ought to be right for women to describe immanence in terms of themselves and transcendence in terms of the other, the beloved other, in terms of male metaphors. For men it would work the other way round. God can be imaged as rich and as poor, as black and as white, as verb and as noun, as female and as male, according only to what the individual speaker is trying to relate about the relationship at that moment in time. But this cannot happen while either side of the polarities is socially known or experienced as 'better', superior to, holier than or conveying power to, more than the other. The language we use describes and recreates the social relationships we experience. Thus in the end language and relating are political as well as theological issues; striving to name God demands, in the process of the enterprise, political action for justice so that we are able both to connect with and to tell aloud the living God, the life in God and the God of the living, freely and ever more fully.

I want to end by reiterating one thing: believing all that I have written, I do not want to take over all the old models and simply brand them with female transpositions. I want the process freed for ever. What I perceive as important, what may actually be important at this point in the process of history, may not remain so. There are other true namings, real relationships, than female

ones. I do not actually believe that God will be hurt by any honest attempts at expanding and correcting the ways we relate, but since I started with Alla Bozarth Campbell I would like to end with another story of hers which gives me hope and joy and, with a bit of luck, humility. It is a story about her guardian angel:

I had long had a verbal communication with my angel, but never any visual image, so I invited my talky angel to put in an appearance. Despite initial reluctance which annoyed me, I finally gained consent . . . I looked and could not believe what I saw! A stereotyped creature with golden hair, long white robes and wings, no less! I said, 'O come on!' and the angel roared with laughter. The joke was on me. Angel said, kindly but still laughing at me, 'Remember you too are a product of your culture'.⁶

NOTES

¹ Bozarth Campbell, Alla: 'Transfiguration/full moon' for *Women listening*. Alla Bozarth Campbell lent me this essay in 1979; at that point the book, a collection of women writing about their prayer life, had not been published. I do not know if it has been now and if so, who edited or published it. I would be grateful if anyone could supply the full reference.

² Quoted from C. Miller and K. Swift, *Words and women* (London, 1979) an invaluable source text for this whole issue.

³ Rosemary Radford Ruether, in an interview with the author, August, 1979, Evanston, III, and quoted in Sara Maitland, *A map of the new country* (London, 1983).

⁴ Cf Marina Warner, *Alone of all her sex: the myth and cult of the Virgin Mary* (London, 1976) for a detailed study of how such images change in affectual value through the historical process.

⁵ Proverbs 8,30-31; rendered into non-sexist language rather unprofessionally by myself.

⁶ Bozarth Campbell, Alla: *Womanpriest* (New York, 1978), p 209.