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Planting Seeds of Peace
Fresh Images of God

In the name of peace, thinking people must make a point of understanding the fear and logic that motivate fundamentalist movements, whether Islam, Jewish, or Christian. Such movements contribute to terrorism and strife by fostering an "us versus them" mentality, arrogance, and patriarchal/martial imagery. In contrast, there is an "emerging paradigm" of Christianity gaining popularity in the U.S. and beyond. One important aspect of this paradigm is a more inclusive view of the Deity. Especially relevant for mothers are images of God that emphasize the relational qualities of spirituality. The author argues that we need images for God which 1) grow out of a child and mother's ordinary, familiar frame of reference; 2) are relational, focusing on intimacy and interaction in such a way as to promote an awareness of God's presence between the child and others, including female others; and 3) focus on the free, active response of the individual.

The author goes on to argue in favour of images of God as Mother, Guide, and Friend. These three images are biblically based and are especially valuable for mothers and children. God as Mother is life-giver, creator, nurturer, and protector. God as Guide is a coach, mentor, teacher, and encourager. God as Friend connotes freedom, mutual respect, companionship, shared interests, commitment, and the sharing of meals and other basic needs. By offering an alternative to patriarchal battle imagery, these images of God can help Christians respect other traditions and promote peaceful coexistence. The article draws upon research by Karen Armstrong, Marcus Borg, Elizabeth Johnson, and others.

When terrorists attacked the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, theologian Karen Armstrong was not surprised. She had recently published a book tracing the world-wide rise of religious extremism in the twentieth century. While many commentators saw the attacks as a throwback to the past,

she viewed them as a uniquely modern phenomenon, one not limited to radical Islam. In a new preface to *The Battle for God* (2001), Karen Armstrong challenges readers to understand the fear that drives religious extremism, whether it be Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. Only by understanding the visceral fear that lies at the heart of fundamentalism can people combat it. Armstrong is convinced that deep-seated fear can lead to nihilism that sees the secular world as having no value. Lest such fear run rampant, we need to transform our religious imaginations. Several current scholars resonate with Armstrong's conviction that religious symbolism shapes attitudes toward peace-making and war-making. Thoughtful attention to religious symbols can help us avoid the violence and separatism of religious extremism. Attention to religious symbols is of special importance to mothers since we are usually the ones who first transmit religious values.

The battlefield metaphor

Armstrong (2001) describes herself as a "free-lance monotheist" with a passion for the three Abrahamic traditions (Islam, Judasim, and Christianity). Her insights have helped me, a lifelong Christian, to come to greater clarity about how to pass my faith on to my young son. Like many parents, I want to equip my child to live a meaningful, ethical life. I hope to transmit a sense of Mystery—an intuitive awareness of the spiritual world, discomfort with easy answers, and the moral strength to live heroically in difficult times. Armstrong helps me articulate religious questions and metaphors in such a way that I can transmit my spiritual tradition, while planting seeds of respect and peace; her insights could be adapted just as well by parents who are Jewish or Muslim. In the following paper, I argue that mothers of young children are in a unique position to plant seeds of peace to counter religious extremism. We can do so by reclaiming under-celebrated images of God, specifically images of God as Mother, Guide, and Friend.

In *The Battle for God*, Armstrong (2001) traces the rise of fundamentalist sects within Islam, Judaism, and American Christianity. What I find most remarkable about her book is the common ground among extremist groups within these three traditions. She outlines particular traits of fundamentalism that cut across different religions: a belief in the literal truth of Scripture; a narrow definition of religious belief; an "us vs. the mentality" that pits believers against non-believers; and martial and patriarchal imagery for the Deity.

Armstrong (2001) builds on her observation that fundamentalists are reacting to the modern world out of a visceral fear. This fear recoils from many aspects of modernity; it seeks refuge in a return to the "fundamentals" of faith. However, these so-called "fundamentals" are *not* rooted in tradition; rather they are a modern distortion of traditional religious values.

The fundamentalists' tendency to view themselves as specially chosen by God leads to arrogance. Such arrogance often fosters a disregard for the values of empathy, compassion, and tolerance—values that lie at the heart of these

three world religions. Many fundamentalists undermine the very values they are ostensibly fighting to preserve; the things that Jesus preached in his Sermon on the Mount (such as humility, peacemaking, thirst after justice) receive inadequate attention.

Moreover, fundamentalists view the world in terms of "us versus them" (believers vs. unbelievers) and embrace martial imagery; they believe themselves to be engaged in a battle between the evil people and God's Chosen people. This combination of arrogance, lack of empathy, and martial imagery is a volatile mix that leads to literal (not just spiritual) warfare that takes a devastating toll.

Islamic extremists believe they are serving God through acts of violence; Armstrong (2001) sees similar aggressive values and rhetoric within Protestant American fundamentalism as espoused by public figures such as Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, and James Dobson. Instead of ridiculing and dismissing such movements, Armstrong argues that thinking people need to address the underlying motivations—specifically the distaste for modernity, the desire for religious meaning, and deep-seated fear of difference, especially religious difference.

The emerging Christian paradigm

Historian Marcus Borg makes a similar argument in *The God We Never Knew* (1998). He focuses not on world religions but on American Christianity, suggesting that there is an "emerging paradigm" of Christianity that addresses religious yearning and fear of modernity but without aggression. This emerging paradigm represents a movement that is both religious and intellectual; it tries to integrate twentieth-century discoveries in science and history with the values of justice, compassion, and religious devotion. Over the last ten years Borg and others have written several books that articulate this emerging Christian paradigm, attracting an enthusiastic following across North America and beyond. Borg emphasizes the importance exploring images of the Deity and their impact on human morality and social relations.[1]

Like Borg, theologian Elizabeth Johnson (1998) asserts that Christians need to change the way they imagine and speak about God. This need is crucial, not just for Christians but for all thinking people: "Literal patriarchal speech about God is both oppressive and idolatrous. It functions to justify social structures of domination/subordination and an andro-centric world view that is inimical to the genuine and equal dignity of women while it simultaneously restricts the mystery of God" (40).

Johnson (1998) explains that how we see God influences the kind of people we become. If one sees God as a Mother, Guide, and intimate Friend, for example, a person will see her own maternal work, her adult maturation, and her inward experiences as part of her faith; in contrast, if she sees God primarily as a Father, Judge, and Lord, she will likely have a more distant, subservient, and perhaps even legalistic relationship with God. Moreover, how a person sees

God will also shape what she expects from family, religious congregation, workplace, government, and other institutions. For example, if a woman sees God as a Wise Woman who guides her through life, she will not readily accept a secondary role in the workplace or in her church. Similarly, if she sees God as "co-madre" or "co-creator," she will expect and cultivate greater cooperation with others as well as with God.

Johnson argues that in addition to justifying social oppression and restricting our understanding of God, patriarchal God-talk disposes people to violence and war. She calls for "extended theological thinking about God in female images" as an "essential element in reordering an unjust and religiously deficient situation" (1998: 57). Both Borg (1998) and Johnson (1998) value images of the Divine that communicate immanence, inclusiveness, respect for the earth, and human dignity for both males and females.

The emerging paradigm of Christianity is particularly significant for Christian women who are in their active mothering years. I maintain that such women need to be discriminating about the religious imagery and language we accept, for at least two reasons: First, because mothers play an essential role in transmitting religious values and images to children; second, and equally important, because mothers are human beings seeking to affirm their own dignity and to better to understand the Divine, usually in the face of oppressive social structures. The rest of this paper will explore three metaphors for God that I believe are of special relevance for mothers and the young children in their care.

Containers for spirituality

Elaine Aron (1998), a psychologist, explains that every person's life is filled with "containers" that hold and shape our lives. Some of these containers are concrete, such as certain clothing, a home, a neighborhood, a favourite building or place in nature. Relationships with other people can be healthy containers—such as a trusted parent, friend, teacher, or spouse. Then there are the inward, intangible containers: a person's deepest beliefs and values, philosophy of life, memories, attitudes, and inner worlds of prayer, images, and meditation.

Aron (1998) goes on to explain that the *tangible* containers *seem* the most real, but it is the *intangible* ones that are really the most reliable. People can endure horrible experiences (like prison, serious illness, concentration camps) if they have inner resources. She describes people who have endured concentration camps but remain spiritually intact because "no one could take from them their private love, faith, creative thinking, mental practice, or spiritual exercise" (1998: 60).

Though Aron (1998) is not focusing on children, the relevance is clear. It is in the early years that we lay the groundwork for children's spirituality as we provide language, images, and practices to give shape to their natural spirituality. Usually it is mothers who are in a position to provide physical containers (home, food, clothing, routines) as well as relational containers. These can be

the foundation for the spiritual containers that will last long after early childhood is forgotten. We want our children to be spiritually strong and resilient, like the weighted toy clowns that can right themselves no matter how many times they are knocked over. To foster such strength, we need to weight them with sand, so to speak—to give them a strong grounding. We do this by providing children with relevant, authentic, spiritual practices.

Aron goes on to explain that "Part of maturing into spiritual wisdom is transferring more and more of your sense of security from the tangible to the intangible containers" so that ultimately we can "conceive of the whole universe as our container" (1998: 61). A spiritual life that begins in childhood can equip a child with resources that can last throughout life.

One of the most important ways to ground our children with "sand" is to equip them with helpful images of God. Of course, ultimately, the human mind cannot understand God. But we can at least *begin to understand* God through language, image, and story. Scripture and tradition offer many metaphors for God: Father, King, Lover, Rock, Stronghold, Mother. These are not literal descriptions of God; rather each one is a metaphor that sheds light on an aspect of God. But some of these (like King or Lover) are beyond the range of modern children's experience. Others (like Lord or Father) are so familiar in religious circles that they may not have power to reach children. Moreover, as Johnson says, they can be used to justify patriarchal social structures as God's will.

As Johnson (1998) observes, an over-emphasis on male imagery has led to oppressive and idolatrous political arrangements; we desperately need female imagery and "God-talk" to correct this imbalance. Another theologian, Mercy Amba Oduyoye, echoes Johnson: "Whatever is keeping the subordination of women alive in the Church cannot be the spirit of God.... [W]e must refuse to cooperate in the devaluation of our persons or humanity" (182, 202; quoted in King, 1998: 49). In any case, Christians in every age are faced with the task of re-discovering ways to talk about—to imagine—God.

Interpretive frameworks

Mothers foster children's spirituality by providing tangible and relational containers that foster security. In our choice of religious stories and images, we are also transmitting to children an interpretive framework that helps them make sense of the world. An interpretive framework is important because experience never occurs in a vacuum—it is always understood within a larger context. The language we have to speak of God's involvement with humans shapes our interpretive framework and, conversely, our interpretive framework limits the available language.

To expand our interpretive framework, Johnson (1998) turns to the Hebrew Bible with its longstanding Wisdom tradition: A guiding spirit was present before the beginning of the world and continues to permeate all of Creation. Certain books of the Hebrew Bible—like Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes—speak boldly of Holy Wisdom and her presence is evident

throughout the Bible. Similarly, the New Testament often mentions the Holy Spirit in feminine terms. The Gospel of John, parts of Acts, and the Epistles all refer to a Spirit intimately involved in human affairs, promising "the peace that passes understanding." Both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, she believes, are rich sources of more expansive names for God. Johnson writes of Holy Wisdom (Sophia) as a "robust, appropriate name for God ... the absolute, relational, liveliness that energizes the world" (1998: 245).

Three images of God are especially fruitful for mothers and children: Mother, Guide, and Friend. Such images share several qualities. All three grow out of a child and mother's ordinary, familiar frame of reference; they emphasize that God is in the home, not just the church-building. They are also relational; they focus on intimacy and interaction in such a way as to promote an awareness of God's presence in the interaction between the child and others, including female others. And finally, all three focus on the active response of the individual. While God is powerful, humans also are powerful too, and are called to action. The images of God as Mother, Guide, and Friend offer an alternative approach to patriarchal battle imagery.

God as Mother

God as Mother is an evocative metaphor; it not only connotes tenderness and nurturing, it also suggests creativity, person-making, and protection. One aspect of God as mother is the way She mothers us, whether we are adults or children. When novelist Madeleine L'Engle was born in 1918, her mother was sick and unable to hold or cuddle her baby much. Instead, L'Engle as an infant was often placed in a wire basket on a shelf, comparable to the plastic cribs used in hospitals today. L'Engle (1996) feels she was damaged by her prolonged early separation from her mother. Throughout her life (even into her 80s), L'Engle spoke of God as "Amma" (her counterpart to Abba; what many would call Mama or Nana). This proved to be a very healing name for God. "When I am feeling down on myself, inadequate, clumsy, worthless, I need the mother to pull me back on her lap, fold the protective wings about me, rock me, tell me that it will be alright," she writes. "I need the Amma God to rock me, to tell me that I am infinitely valuable, God's child, loved exactly as I am" (1996: 129). Whether we imagine God holding us in her lap, braiding our hair, rocking us to sleep, or tenderly feeding us, the effect is to affirm God's personal love and nearness.

Another aspect of God as mother is the way She shares mothering with us, She is our "co-madre" or "other mother" as we nurture and guide our children and others in our care. With our bodies—our brains, hearts, hands, wombs, and breasts—we mothers co-create the world with God. This creation happens dramatically in gestation and physical birth as we create a new human being out of our very flesh. Less dramatic but just as important is the ongoing "person-making" that mothers continue day after day through changing diapers, reading stories, soothing, and instructing.

In the book *Maternal Thinking,* philosopher Sara Ruddick (1990) writes about the preservation (protection), training, and nurturing that are universal components of childrearing; all these are part of the ongoing formation of a child, the person-making, which mothers continue as long as children are in their care. In her view, these are all forms of mothering that need not be carried out by biological mothers. All the caring professions—such as teaching, nursing, social work, medicine—are arenas where women can co-create with God.

Such creating is not limited to the caring professions. Mothering can also be a metaphor for all life-giving, creative action. Human beings (men, women, *and children*) are co-creating with God as we "mother" all things into existence, including imaginative ventures in science and technology, the arts, the discovery of new ideas and new worlds. From Madame Curie to Sally Ride to J.K. Rowling (whose *Harry Potter* series has helped so many rediscover reading), women partner with God to create the world anew.

As we are ourselves mothered, so we mother the world, and our relationship with God can be a central part of the process. By affirming our connections with God as Mother, mothers can help children also believe in an intimate, powerful, and benevolent God.

God as Guide

God is also a guide, mentor, teacher, or coach. All these are relationships that children understand readily because, at their best, they are extensions of the motherly role. Because a guide has more experience and knowledge, she is able to help to help a younger person to grow and eventually reach equality. As a child's world grows larger, she acquires (in a healthy society) more coaches and mentors who can equip her with needed skills.

Such guides are important for mothers, too. In many cultures, it is common for a birthing woman to have a doula, an older woman who stays in her home while she recovers from childbirth and establishes a new relationship with her children and others. Today such a role might be filled by a woman's mother or an older neighbour or friend. It is more common to associate mentors with the workplace where ideally a mentor is a seasoned worker who unselfishly assists a younger person. Mentors are important not just in the early years but throughout life, and adults need mentor-friends just as young people do. Such guides might be found in a pastor, spiritual director, older friend, or even a favourite saint.

Whether we speak in terms of coach, teacher, doula, or mentor, a guide is a powerful image of God because it connotes caring, helpfulness, and generosity. Johnson (1998) reclaims Sophia, the Spirit of Wisdom, from the Hebrew Bible. There Sophia is portrayed as a guide who invites all beings to a banquet, who calls all to follow the path of life, who promises intimacy, peace, and delight. Johnson sees a connection between Sophia and the Holy Spirit in Christian theology, in that Sophia is a force that works with God the Father:

"Sophia comes toward human beings, tests and challenges them. She is a beneficent, right ordering power in whom God delights and by whom God creates" (1998: 88). Like a mother, a guide offers encouragement and support, but she also invites us to grow into more; she "tests and challenges" us.

This image of God as Guide is evident in the teachings of Alcoholics Anonymous and various Twelve-Step recovery groups. Such groups speak of God as their "Higher Power," a force that is both personal and transcendent, who guides them toward healing. Turning to a "Higher Power" has enabled millions of people to salvage lives wrecked by addiction, bringing dramatic healing to them and their families.

God as Friend

A third rich image for God is that of friend. Theologian Sally McFague (1988) points out that friendship, of all human relationships, is the most free. Mother, spouse, worker, and siblings are all roles created by necessity, while a friend alone is freely chosen. Friendship connotes mutual respect, pleasure in each other's company, shared interests, a commitment to trust and loyalty, the sharing of meals and other basic needs.

Friendship is characterized by companionship and familiarity. A companion is literally one who is "with bread." L'Engle describes family and friends as "the people we are committed to, the people we treat with love and respect, and eat our meals with ... the people we forgive" (qtd. in Chase, 1998: 103).

Friendship is also a remarkably resilient and versatile kind of relationship. Deep friendships endure through many phases of life in ways that other relationships may not. Think of the ten-year-old who is discovering the difference between a buddy and a true friend, the college student who finds her first kindred spirit in a new place, the spouse who grows into a trusted friend, the widow who enjoys travelling with dear friends. Friendship endures throughout the various stages of life.

Because of the intimacy of friendship, it is similar to what L'Engle describes as "the flash." As an awkward, lonely child, she first experienced God's presence as an intuitive "flash ... [a sense of] love all about her and around her, breathed out from some great, invisible, hovering Tenderness" (L'Engle and Brooke, 1985: 18, quoting *Emily of the New Moon*).

In the Hebrew Bible, the term for God who brings hope in the midst of darkness and struggle is *Shekinah* (pronounced SHEK-in-ah or shek-KI-nah). *Shekinah* connotes "the dwelling" or "the one who dwells" close to her beloved people, just as a friend offers refuge and understanding during good times and bad. Shekinah is often associated with light, luminosity, or insight, much like L'Engle's "flash." Perhaps the most familiar manifestation of Shekinah was the pillar of fire by night (and pillar of cloud by day) that guided the Israelites through the desert wilderness. Just as a friend can communicate through a knowing glance or a nod, humans often experience the presence of God as a flash of awareness.

Matthew and Dennis Linn and Sheila Fabricant Linn conduct healing workshops around the world, helping people to heal from past hurts and traumas. The focus of these workshops is changing people's image of God. "We encourage people to ask for healing. If you don't have—consciously or unconsciously—a good image of God, you can't do that," says Sheila Fabricant Linn. They encourage an image of a loving God, present in all life experiences, good and bad, sometimes using a notion of God as mother and nurturer. Their workshops have helped people who have experienced the loss of a loved one, torture, war, and abuse. "One of the easiest ways to receive healing is to change your image of God," says Dennis Linn (qtd. in Schuck-Schreiber, 1997: 14).

To sum up, as mothers we can equip ourselves as well as our children, with healing, empowering images of God. Three such images are Mother, Guide, and Friend. They foster spirituality that is rooted in daily life and ordinary contemporary experiences. They promote loving attention to personal relationships, including a personal relationship with God. The are also conducive to an active human response to God, one that may include questioning, critical thinking, innovation, and social as well as personal transformation. Johnson (1998) argues that such images are long overdue, and that we need them to fuel efforts toward a more just society. I'll let Johnson have the last word:

> [New images of God promote] the investigation of a suppressed world directed ultimately toward the design of a new whole. Shaping this kind of speech is not an end in itself but must be received as an essential element in an unjust and deficiently religious situation. (Johnson, 1998: 57)

[1]Borg (1998) has reached a huge audience throughout the United States and beyond. Feminist scholars paved the way for Borg, especially in regard to images of God; some of the more noteworthy are Elizabeth Johnson (1998) (*She Who Is*); Mary Daly (1975) (*The Church and the Second Sex)* and (1974) *Beyond God the Father*); Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza (1995) (*In Memory of Her* and (1992) (*But She Said*); Rosemary Radford Ruether (1992) (*Sexism and God-Talk*); and Margaret Hebblethwaite (1994) (*Six New Gospels*). In addition to these western theologians, authors from other cultures have contributed important ideas, including Kwok Pui-Lan (1995) (Chinese author of *Discovering the Bible in a Non-Biblical World*) and Mercy Amba Oduyoye (1995) (Nigerian author of *Daughters of Anowa*). For a concise and readable introduction to Christian feminist theology, see *Whispers of Liberation: Feminist Perspectives on the New Testament* by Nicholas King (1998).

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