

## ENGAGING THE FEMININE

SILVIO FITTIPALDI

A few years ago a member of the FCRP posed a question that touches on the theme of these reflections. She asked: "Why do you keep coming back to the FCRP?" At that time I had no immediate response except that I returned to the conference because it offered me a respect for my need for solitariness and because my creative urges were stimulated. More recently another member of the FCRP sent to me a copy of Chris Downing's 1978 Rachel Cadbury Lecture. At the beginning of that lecture Downing spoke of the FCRP in the following manner:

From its beginnings this group has tended to emphasize what are traditionally regarded as more "feminine" or more introverted approaches to religious experience. The importance attached to intuitive insight and mythological and metaphorical expression implies some suspicion of the power of rational conceptual discourse to do justice to the subtleties of religious experience.<sup>1</sup>

As I read these words and reflected on them I thought that, maybe, that is why I, who was living in a all male monastic setting, returned to the FCRP, namely, to reconnect with the feminine in myself, to image metaphorically with the people there. I also have a suspicion of the exclusive power of rational conceptual discourse and have felt and taught the power of the intuitive in such rational sciences as math. Each year at the FCRP I would become engaged in some art form as poetry, dance, pottery or painting and begin to touch on depths in myself that I had been missing. Maybe they can be called the "feminine" aspect of my person.

Thus, for those of us who have experienced this conference, I would suggest that a powerful image of the feminine, a living symbol of the engagement of the feminine, is the FCRP itself.

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## Defining The Feminine?

The process of defining an aspect of reality is a process of specification and the discovery of boundaries. It is a process of abstracting a part from the whole. I, particularly, describe <sup>4</sup>"defining" as a "process" insofar as I want to communicate it as a living, ongoing reality rather than a static conceptualization. The process of defining is a process of continually discovering the limitations and potential of one's life in the world, a process of identification and creation, in an ongoing manner, of the ground from which a person lives. It is with this in mind that I present three approaches to the feminine that seem to me to touch on central issues, approaches that present the feminine as engaged in a process of wholeness.

The first approach that I want to present is taken from an article by Valerie Valle and Elizabeth Kruger<sup>2</sup>. Initially, the authors contrast male and female in terms of the cultural stereotypes that define the male consciousness as clear, logical, unemotional and in complete control in contrast to female consciousness as nonrational, intuitive and striving toward union. Then, after arguing for the fullness and healthiness of androgyny, Valle and Kruger go on to describe a feminine style of consciousness grounded in three experiences that belong solely to women, namely, menstruation, pregnancy and birth, and breastfeeding. Five traits are then listed as present in feminine consciousness stemming from these experiences. The experience of time as cyclical rather than as linear can come from the experience of menstruation. The process of pregnancy and giving birth lead to the experience of creativity as the creating "of the environment necessary for the emergence of the created," as well as the<sup>4</sup> ability to let go of ego-control of a situation and let one's inner nature guide." Thirdly, <sup>4</sup>"responsiveness to and awareness of the needs of others" as well as <sup>4</sup>"interest in the development of symbiotic, mutually fulfilling relationships" can come from the experience of breastfeeding.

Secondly, Rosemary Ruether gives her readers a major challenge in her article "Motherearth and the Megamachine."<sup>3</sup> In the end, Ruether's challenge is for us humans to realize our potential for wholeness. She concisely sets us the problem in the following words:

All the basic dualities—the alienation of the mind from the body; the alienation of the subjective self from the objective

world; the subjective retreat of the individual, alienated from the social community; the domination or rejection of nature by spirit—these all have roots in the apocalyptic-Platonic religious heritage of classical Christianity. But the alienation of the masculine from the feminine is the primary sexual symbolism that sums up all these alienations. The psychic traits of intellectuality, transcendent spirit, and autonomous will that were identified with the male left the woman with the contrary traits of bodiliness, sensuality, and subjugation."<sup>4</sup>

Ruether then argues for a reconciliation of these opposites. Her image is the cultivation of a garden in which "the powers of rational consciousness come together with the harmonies of nature in partnership."<sup>5</sup>

A third suggestion comes from Chris Downing in her recent book, *The Goddess: Mythological Images of the Feminine*. At the beginning of this book Downing writes:

The being of the goddess is related to her having a feminine body but is not delimited by that. Indeed, the earliest traditions seem to have imagined her as parthogenetic and thus androgynous. She is feminine—and masculine. She represents a unity that encompasses this duality."<sup>6</sup>

Each of these three women attempts to describe the feminine in such a way that the wholeness of the human is realized. I would like to suggest that there is some organic relationship between the male and female sexual structure biologically and the complex of characteristics designated respectively as masculine and feminine. At the same time, however, each human person is more than her or his biology. To define a human person only from a biologically grounded perspective would be reductionistic and would destroy the multi-levelled complexity of human persons. At our deepest level we struggle to become fully human, reaching in and out for the wholeness of which each of us is a living and dying symbol. And that is the holiness we seek.

### The Feminine in Religion?

The religions throughout the world have been deeply responsible for the disengagement of the feminine in culture as well as for the relegating of some aspects of the human to women and others to

men. At the same time, there are present in religion images that symbolize the integration of the feminine and the masculine. In the following I want to share some of my experiences of this integration.

From the time when I was a child I was nurtured by the Roman Catholic liturgy and worship. These liturgical celebrations were highly organized. There was a rhythm of word and silence, centered at the altar, symbolizing the presence of Christ in the community and manifested in the movement of the ministers, the color of the dress, the world of the music and housed in some superb church structures. When I think of a church building I think first of the church on the campus of Villanova University with its two spires reaching into the sky and the dark silence within, broken by shafts of sunlight that filtered through the stained glass windows. I spent many hours in this place where the liturgical services touched my intuitive as well as my rational powers, where I often sat in quiet meditation, a meditation that opened me to the sensitivity of Jesus of Nazareth. This description contains images of both masculine and feminine. I never thought of the experience in this way. Now I realize that it integrated the feminine and the masculine.

I am carried from the church at Villanova to the magnificent cathedrals in Europe, especially Cologne, Notre Dame and Chartres. In their own silent way they symbolize the union of the masculine and the feminine with their deep inner darkness and their reaching toward the sky. In particular, the labyrinth at Chartres reminds me of the god and goddess who are related in a labyrinth. Religion has been a quest in a labyrinth for me, a quest for soul. I have discovered that I do not have to reach the geographical center to discover this soul. Rather, as I walk, holding both ends of the string, I come upon soul at each turn of the corner. And I can also discover that soul by sitting and resting on the journey, being at home. I walk and rest with anxiety and fear as well as trust and confidence.

My imagination now moves eastward to the Hindu temples at Khajarah, a small village in north central India. At the center of a temple dedicated to Shiva is a small, dark womb chamber. Within this chamber is a lingam. The feminine and the masculine are joined. On the outside, in the societies surrounding this temple as well as the cathedrals of Europe and the churches in the western hemisphere, men and women are separated by a broad cultural sexism. At the heart of the religious imagination, however, they are

joined. They meet. It is this image of Meeting that I point to as central to a religious sensitivity to the feminine. It is here that, I believe we touch on the heart of Quakerism. In the Society of Friends the meeting is the central dynamic living symbol along with that of the Inner Light.

I want to conclude this section by sharing some reflections on images of God. Insofar as we humanize God or divinize the human, God is presented as female or male. The engagement of the feminine calls for both male and female images of God. This will involve a major shift in the western religions, at least, a shift that is necessary, I believe, for us to realize the fullness of life—male and female—that is possible. In order for this to happen there are aspects of divinity that will have to come to the fore that might appear strange and unusual. It is true that there are a number of images of the nurturing God in the Bible. I affirm these and hope that they enter more dynamically into Christian and Jewish consciousness as feminine as well as masculine. However, there is another image of God that evokes the feminine in me.

From my earliest years, the name God evoked in me a vague presence. As I grew in age and especially in the midst of my meetings with the Hindu traditions and Buddhism and the Christian theology of Karl Rahner, I came to a realization of God as mystery—the unnamable, the silent one who speaks in silence, the dark as well as the light, chaos as well as order. I came to experience the divine dimension of reality as that experience of an inability to fully fence in reality, to fully define it or ourselves, to fully image a reality in which I live whose images continuously change, whose boundaries I cannot pin down. I came to realize that God is not to be symbolized merely by the order of the clockmaker but also by the boiling pot of water, not only manifest in the intricately structured Taj Mahal but also in the teeming, tumbling back streets of Calcutta, the city of Kali. In the end, we need the goddesses as well as the gods. They can point us to images of the full humanity and then beyond to the fullness of reality.

#### The Feminine: Receptivity and Power?

As I reflect on receptivity and the feminine, I am carried into my own training as a minister which is training to be a servant. It seems to me that this experience has parallels in the lives of women

who are reared in our culture to be women which is to be a servant, and in the lives of men and women in the corporate world. There is both limitation and power in this training to be a servant and this is the limitation and power of being receptive. It also is a process that involves much risk and trust.

Many Christian people, ordained and unordained ministers have been trained to follow in the footsteps of Christ and to be for others. A fundamental element of my own training involved serving others, not on my own terms or on the terms of those being served but rather on the terms of the church. From the age of 13, in the seminary, as well as in my homelife, a style of life was given to me and I was constrained to form myself according to its form and patterns. That form was called the "will of God." Often it was the will of a human director.

As a teenager I struggled with that will as I struggled for my own identity. In the end I succumbed to the form, at least externally. All along, however, I did feel a unique soul pressing itself forward.

A central element in my training was the development of the virtue of obedience. Such obedience involved doing the will of another and, again, shaping ourselves according to the terms of another. Gradually, I began to realize that obedience meant to listen, to take in, to receive. And I began to listen to many voices. Not only did I hear the voices of our directors but I also began to hear my own voice and to hear murmurs from the many people I was reading, novelists and philosophers such as Tolstoy and Camus, Sartre and Marcel, Buber and Carl Rogers. I began to realize that there were other shapes and forms and that I had a hand in the creation, a very small hand at first and a hand that I continue to struggle to discover.

In 1963 I was deeply touched by Carl Rogers who gave to me a very personal way to relate with others. In his client-centered therapy, I found a way to center myself on the other and to reflect their side to the other. I had not yet found a solid side of my own. Rather I tried to enter the side of the other, to imagine it and to search out with that other opening ways beyond their own struggle and pain. Such hearing is quite powerful. Yet there is something missing from it.

The question was posed to me: Where do you stand? What are your terms? Where is your ground? I had a difficult time responding

to those questions which are really the same question: Where are you in all this? And that continues to be my major question. I was experiencing what Buber calls the experience of the other side. I was and am weak in the experience of my own side. I could receive but I had a difficult time asking for what I wanted (not in an ego-centric way). I could give on the terms of the other but not as easily on my own terms.

The power of receptivity, in the Buberian sense, is a power that is not isolated but rather is joined with the power of having a side of one's own. To receive only on the terms of another is unfair to both the giver and the receiver. Rather a fair and full receptivity is one in which I can hear the other side and hear my own side. Then I can choose to give and to receive in accordance with a balance of give and take. Hopefully, that would be more satisfying to all involved over the long run.

Two images come to me with regard to this kind of receptivity. The first is a mutual embrace where energy moves in both directions. Trust and risk are involved in both receiving and giving. The power is not simply in one or the other but in the exchange between them.

Another image that is pertinent to me recently is that of a doorway. To stand actively on a doorway is to stand in the "between," a place of intense trust, a quite auspicious place. I stood on a doorway in 1976 in a Shiva temple in Madras. Someone requested that I go in or out. I did not understand. I respectfully went out. Now I choose to stand in the doorway. For to bring myself to the doorway is an act of trust in the past and the future. To stand between, giving and receiving is to be a different kind of servant than one who lives only on the terms of another. Rather the servant who lives in the "between" is formed by self and other, is formed in the relation, in the meeting. My center then is not in myself, or in the other, but rather in the realm between or among us. The movement is not simply toward an eternal Thou but rather in the eternal between. This is the power of a receptivity that is a part of a process rather than one in which I live on the terms of another solely. It is a receptivity that is part of an exchange.

Thus the primary image that I offer as an image of the engagement of the feminine is the image of a meeting. To enter a meeting

with openness and receptivity, as well as with ones own power, is to trust and to risk and to engage all the elements of the present reality in an exchange that grows and changes shape and rests in the confidence of the processes of meeting.

#### REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup> Downing, Christine, *Religious Life and the Feminine Experience*, Philadelphia, Friends General Conference, 1978, pamphlet, p. 3.

<sup>2</sup>Valle, Valerie and Kruger, Elizabeth, "The Nature and Expression of Feminine Consciousness through Psychology and Literature," in *The Metaphors of Consciousness*, Ronald Valle and Rolf von Eckartsberg, editors; New York, Plenum, 1981, pp. 379-393.

<sup>3</sup>Ruether, Rosemary R., "Motherearth and the Megamachine," in *Woman spirit Rising*, edited by Carol Christ and Judith Plaskow; San Francisco, Harper and Row, 1979, pp. 43-52.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid, p. 44.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid, p. 52.

<sup>6</sup>Downing, Christine, *The Goddess: Mythological Images of the Feminine*; New York, Crossroads, 1981, p. 13.

## ENGAGING THE FEMININE: REFLECTIONS

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As I search for words with which to communicate my sense of the feminine, my mind whirls, circles, intertwines, and that which is uppermost gives way to that which rises. It turns, as the symbol for the Yin and the Yang seems to turn on itself. In the Introduction to his translation of the *I Ching*<sup>1</sup>, Richard Wilhelm helps to clarify our concepts of feminine and masculine. He reminds us that when the

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