

## **The Feminine Role in Religion: An Antidote to Violence**

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### **Abstract**

Religion is a kind of relationship that links the human to the divine. Philosophically speaking, it is the manifestation of the human quest of happiness, where the latter is eternal and certain only when linked to some being beyond all the finiteness of this world. In this context, violence appears to be a distortion where the human strive for *being more* becomes a selfish taking attitude, where being more is understood as being all. This selfishness takes the form of rejecting otherness as a whole, which becomes a rejection of the feminine value in a world supposed to be governed by the masculine power. But complementarity between men and women is a fact to be emphasized in all aspects of life, and since religion is the human quest for perfection, where life is found abundantly, it cannot but take into consideration both aspects of humanity in relationship with the divine. After all, humans were created as men and women, and any tentative to disturb that order in creation by undervaluing an aspect of humanity would end up in violence. A common aspect of violent patterns is the marginalization of women's role in decision making and in social development, not to mention the scandalizing marginalization of women in religious leadership. Here the distribution of roles between men and women becomes a very important field for research. The paper shows the importance of the feminine role in religion, while focusing on the feminine role in avoiding violence, mostly in the monotheistic religions. The feminine role is to be explored on the anthropological level as well as the psychological and metaphysical levels. The feminine is an essential

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aspect of our humanity, and we can only get in touch with it through the active role of women. The paper draws our attention to the confusion between the symbolic aspect of receptivity, associated to the feminine, and the passivity imposed on women by some misunderstanding of religious passages, which minimizes the role of women. Women have an important role in protecting and nurturing humanity, making sure the religious path develops into an environment where empathy and forgiveness are promoted, which is a religious message that prevents violence, and helps religion fulfill its purpose.

**Keywords:** Feminine, Complementarity, Religion, Marginalization of women.

## I. Introduction

Religion is the relationship that links the human to the divine. Philosophically speaking, it is the manifestation of the human quest for happiness, where the latter is eternal and certain only when linked to some being beyond all the finiteness of this world. However, this quest for happiness in the divine could drift into a quest for power, where humans become the center of the truth by claiming to have found the divine into one version, only theirs, thus forcing anyone who does not abide by this same version of the truth to live a hell on earth, or to disappear from the faith of the earth.

This is where human history witnesses religious violence, a distortion of the human quest, where striving for *being more* through the One who is always more, becomes a quest for being all, an arrogant pretention to hold all the truth, and to possess the only key to salvation. This is how I understand the original sin, in the Judeo-Christian tradition, where the first humans wanted to integrate the knowledge of good and evil into themselves, rejecting the fact that the center of good and evil is beyond their finiteness. The result was a rejection of one another, where Eve would accuse nature and Adam would accuse Eve, and the harmony amongst the three becomes a discord, introducing pain into the universe.<sup>1</sup>

This rejection resulted into more solitude for humans, since they could not realize that *being more*, a legitimate dream that draws out the difference between humans and animals, cannot but go through otherness, precisely

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<sup>1</sup> See Gn. 3:12-14, Adam blames Eve for giving him from the fruit of the tree, and she blames it on the serpent

through receptivity from otherness. It is that being more starts by admitting that we are finite, and that in order to reach perfection, we need to open up to the other, who is different from us, which is precisely why we are called to receive from this other what could fulfill us, and cannot possibly be in us.

Happiness, then, goes through the other, and aloneness is the opposite of happiness, since it keeps the person inside the prison of finiteness and imperfection, away from the natural human hope of *being more*, the hope of going beyond the actual state of finiteness into a potential eternal happiness.

## **II. From Story of Creation to the religious reality**

In the Judeo-Christian tradition, the act of creation took place over different stages, and with every new creation, God saw it was good. The first time the opposite of good appears in the scriptures would be when God saw that “it is not good for Adam to be alone”.<sup>2</sup> And then, after bringing all the animals in front of Adam in order to be named, sign of mastery over nature and animals, the text reminds us that Adam was still alone, and that he still needed healing from this state of “not good”.<sup>3</sup> But as Augustine remarks in his enquiry on the origins of evil, the absence of good is what defines evil, which is not an entity on its own.<sup>4</sup> And according to the biblical text, the first time an absence of good occurred in creation is when Adam was found alone. Of course, this aloneness was still only probable, since the text is not telling the story of creation in a strictly chronological order, but in an ontological order, where everything is to be created within the good. On this ontological level, the cure to this potential aloneness could not be the reign over animals, or the control over the earth. The real divine remedy for the evil of aloneness in humanity was the existence of woman. In the biblical text, Adam would recognize this when he says “This is now [lit: “this is the proper step!”], bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh, for this it is called Woman, for from a man hath this been taken”.<sup>5</sup>

I find this text to be at the heart of the feminine role in religion, since religion is the relationship between the human and the divine. When a potential problem was to exist between humanity and God, causing the “not good” to exist in nature, the divine answer was the creation of the woman.

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<sup>2</sup> Genesis 2:18.

<sup>3</sup> “The man gave names to all the cattle, and to the birds of the sky, and to every beast of the field, but for Adam there was not found a helper like himself.” (Gn.2:20)

<sup>4</sup> “Evil has no positive nature; but the loss of good has received the name 'evil.'”; Augustine, *The City of God*, XI, CHAP. 9

<sup>5</sup> Genesis 2:23

In the Quran, creation was all made out of one person, as we see in Al A'araf "It is He who created you from one soul and created from it its mate that he might dwell in security with her."<sup>6</sup>

هُوَ الَّذِي خَلَقَكُمْ مِنْ نَفْسٍ وَاحِدَةٍ وَجَعَلَ مِنْهَا زَوْجَهَا لِيَسْكُنَ إِلَيْهَا فَلَمَّا تَغَشَّاهَا حَمَلَتْ حَمْلًا خَفِيًّا  
فَمَرَّتْ بِهِ

The verb used in the Quranic verse, "yaskouna", comes from "sakana", which means inhabited, but also means found comfort or rest, which explains why the translator would use the term "dwell in security". But "soukoun" is also the state of no motion. So what could it mean? I would like to associate the verb "yaskouna" in this verse with a state of serene contemplation, where humans live a state of receptivity, without motion, a state of peace where we receive the real divine which created us, not the divine that we create at our own image. Going back to the book of Genesis, "the Lord God cast a deep sleep upon Adam: and when he was fast asleep, he took one of his ribs"<sup>7</sup> ... and created the woman. This state of deep sleep where Eve was created was a state of pure receptivity, a mystic contemplation of the divine in a direct relationship, without the mediation of the mind. This receptivity and contemplation is a deep relationship with God, where humans receive the meaning of life, without the effort of their reason, in a state that would be the ultimate goal of religious activity.

This story of creation, shared in Judeo-Christian traditions, takes place *in illo tempore*, as Eliade likes to put it, in order to explain the natural relationship between men and women. Man finds peace in woman, and they both find in each other an answer to the call for perfection. Male and female God created humans in Genesis, and the Quran says they were created from the same nature. And since religion contains both a revelatory aspect and a part related to the human quest for perfection, it cannot ignore the role of both men and women in this quest. Woman reflects to the man part of what is invisible to him in perfection, just as man reflects to woman part of what is invisible to her in perfection. This is why the unity of both, and only this unity, can produce life, an act of co-creation, in partnership with the divine.

### III. Role of Women in Life: An analytical Approach

This anthropological perspective introduces us to the role of women in life, and specifically in the relationship with the divine, and thus in religion. Another

<sup>6</sup> Al A'araf 7: 189..

<sup>7</sup> Genesis 2:21.

way to see that feminine role would be through the observation of the natural distribution of roles in the act of pro-creation. Obviously, motherhood is something only a woman can do. But what does this mean, on the sociological and psychological levels? It means that women are disposed for motherhood, which is their vocation, as Edith Stein puts it. Note that a woman does not necessarily have to be a mother in order to live the vocation of motherhood. She is naturally equipped with motherhood skills, which find one of the forms of actualization in effective motherhood. Since the woman is designed to hold life, as Stein says, she has a psychological disposition to nurture and protect life. This role is, according to Stein, within the essence of femininity. A woman has thus all the characteristics of a mother, even before she actualizes them. Of course, this vision is linked to the scholastic principle of *anima forma corporis*, which was accepted by Stein. But even without such a principle, the observation of womanhood cannot but confirm that disposition to motherhood within women, whether the origin of this disposition comes from the physical or the spiritual. The idea of the social construction of gender, presented by Judith Butler, cannot but fail in front of the physical constitution of women. And since the interaction and mutual influence between the psychological and the physical is a fact, one cannot possibly assume the existence of a human essence, within which society would distribute feminine and masculine roles. Femininity is an essence, as well as masculinity, and the distribution of roles within society was highly prescribed by nature, at least when it comes to motherhood and fatherhood.

Stein considers that “the mysterious process of generating a new creature in the motherly organism is such an intimate unity of psychical and physical elements that this unity is part of the imprint of the entire female nature.”<sup>8</sup>

But how does a woman live her role of motherhood without being a mother? To nurture and protect would be a good beginning of an answer. To nurture humanity, means to play the role of the first guardian of the human value, before birth, during life, and at the hour of death. To protect humanity, means to keep it safe from the corruption of arrogance, where one vision could be assumed to be the right one, condemning all other visions of the world, and judging them unworthy of existence, a judgment that God alone is capable of doing, as the creator of all existence. Here, we get to the role of empathy, attributed to the feminine. But what is empathy?

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<sup>8</sup> Edith Stein (1996) *Essays on Woman*, 2d ed. Revised, translated by Freda Mary Oben, Ph.D. This includes eight essays on the theme of woman and her vocation, p. 89.

Empathy, or em-pathos, is the ability and disposition to feel the pain of others, assuming it as our own. It is this faculty that helped humans evolve, because it is a faculty in us that enables us to live the painful experience of others, and thus to learn from the things that we did not actually experience, but rather lived through another person. What is interesting about empathy is that it is not a rational faculty, especially since our reason always tries to escape pain. This faculty is a purely emotional one, where we mysteriously experience the emotions of another person, not without the assistance of reason, yet against its natural will, or reflex, to escape the pain. Neuroscience has proved that empathy is a natural faculty within every human being, a faculty that is observed in children, for example, during their first day of school, where one child's anxiety influences all other kids, and they start all crying, one after the other.

But this faculty of empathy is closely associated with our receptivity, our faculty of receiving the outside world and internalizing it into our internal thinking. This faculty coincides with the Jungian anima, the feminine part in every human being. For this reason, Stein assumed that women are more equipped for empathy than men, which is why she recommended they be directed into medical careers, where empathy plays an eminent role, and educational careers, where empathy gives them a lead into educating people and helping them develop.

However, we now know, also through neuroscience, that women are not more empathetic than men, and that empathy is a human faculty, of both men and women.<sup>9</sup> However, in order for us to develop the anima in us, we need an external feminine image, and that image is to be reflected through the woman, who also needs an external image of the animus, which is to be reflected through the man. This dynamic manifests itself splendidly within healthy families, where children experience love from both a man and a woman. Thus they avoid drifting into a selfish vision of the world, or into a state of illusionary self-satisfaction. Children learn to develop their animus and anima from their relationship with their father and mother, respectively.

So empathy, which is parallel to the state of motherhood, necessitates the existence of an actively engaged mother, who receives life in her, and nurtures it and protects it for healthy development. This state of receptivity, where a person receives and processes somebody else's feeling, is a necessary requirement for compassion, where one feels with others, with a disposition to act in order to

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<sup>9</sup> See: Emiliana R. Simon-Thomas (2007) "Are women more empathic than men?" in *Greater Good*, issue 1 June 2007.

help others. And this state of receptivity necessitates a healthy feminine image in us, which cannot be accomplished without the social empowerment of women, where they play their social role as active figures, giving a sane image to young people who are developing in societies.

This is why a common trait of fanaticism, in all religions, is the marginalization of women. This marginalization, as we have seen earlier, was never dictated by religious texts, and could not be considered as an implication of the sacred stories of the origins. On the contrary, religious texts emphasize the role of women in the development of humanity, and in the relationship with the divine. In Judaism and Christianity, the story of original sin implies a loss in order, where the first man and woman came to discord. But the accusation thrown against Eve, by Adam, was not actually just an accusation against the woman; it was, in reality, an accusation against God, where Adam says to God: “the woman that you placed with me, she has given to me of the tree...” Stressing on the fact that God placed the woman with him, the woman which became the gate for sin, can only be interpreted as an accusation against God for the sin of man, and thus for the disorder in nature. Here, we should note that the Quran holds both Adam and Eve equally responsible for the sin of disobedience to God.<sup>10</sup> We should also note that the attribution of original sin to women, in Judaism and Christianity, is nothing but a misinterpretation of the scriptures, a continuous accusation of God as the real source of evil in the world. Since the text has a highly symbolic meaning, the attribution of the beginning of sin to woman brings us back to the receptivity in the human being. This receptivity, which is the gate to receiving the word of God, could become the gate for the evil one to whisper and send his ideas. Humans will thus have to differentiate and decide what to choose, and their choice would only be a good one when they are open to the divine will. The marginalization of women, or considering them as the gate for sin, and thus accusing them of being the source of men’s evil or minimizing the importance of their social role, is nothing but a continuation of this accusation against God. Is it a coincidence that the same fanatic groups who despise women claim that they hold all the truth, and that they can judge who should live and who should die, thus claiming themselves to be the divine authority? And isn’t this claim equivalent to the act of eating from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, where humans wanted to be the absolute reference, building their own tower of arrogance in order to reach the heavens?

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<sup>10</sup> See: Quran 7:19-22.

To consider the woman to be the weaker sex, or the element that can never lead, is another underestimation of the religious role of Eve, a living temple where humans rest, where they contemplate the divine. Is this not why the feminine beauty became an inspiration to wonderful writings of poetry? Is it not also why mystics compare the human soul to a woman who reaches unity with God, where human receptivity becomes willingly open to all divine suggestions, up to the point of asking for human will to disappear in order for the divine will to take over?

This paroxysm of the religious relationship with God can never be reached without a healthy feminine image in society. But how does this image manifest itself in a healthy way?

Just as in a family a marginalized mother causes psychological disorder in a person's psyche, the image of a marginalized woman in society ends up creating serious disorder in the religious person's soul, as well as a disorder in the active identity of a citizen. This implies, then, a more active role for women both in society and religion. The role of nurturing and protecting enables women to be impartially present, in order to bring the best in people. Women can thus play a prominent role in conflict resolution, especially that they are associated with the symbol of empathy, a faculty without which a problem cannot be solved in a healthy way. Actually, a conflict always produces pain, and one of the reasons why a problem would not be resolved for good is that the conflicting parties do not see their pain being validated. Validating the pain, which is only possible through empathy, is thus a necessary step in order to resolve the conflict and get over the pain. But this act is not possible without the companionship of a female figure, a woman that advises, heals and reforms what has gone away from the real human goal.

#### **IV. Concluding remarks**

This feminine image could be restored in a society by empowering women to take up any role in the society, from an engineer to a doctor, to a political leader. The more we see women in different roles, the better the image of the feminine is reflected, and thus the healthier the personality of citizens is. Who said, for example, that a feminine image of the divine judgment would harm the believers? Would not a woman who is occupying the position of a judge generate the image of a more understanding God, one that is not afraid of expressing compassion with humans?

This leads us to the discussion on having women in positions of religious leadership. Here, let me clarify that leadership could have different aspects, not necessarily by occupying the position of a sheikh or imam or priest. I can think of many examples where a woman has become a religious authority, when it comes to interpretation of sacred texts, or deriving moral rules, or reforming religious rites. Religious figures like Fatima, *Rabiah al Adawiyya*, Theresa of Avilla, Mother Theresa, and many others, have created systems for applying belief and faith. They also interpreted passages of the Quran and the Bible, and are nowadays considered as religious authority.

If complementarity between men and women is a fact without which there would be no continuity of life, and since God obviously designed this complementarity to be a necessity for the procreation of life, why shouldn't we emphasize this complementarity in all aspects of life?

A very important point in Soloviev's thinking, which influenced Teilhard de Charidin, was the power of love as a uniting force in the universe, a force that keeps the world developing and growing. This force was called by Teilhard de Chardin "the eternal feminine", a force which image is personalized into the Virgin Mary, the feminine image by excellence according to De Charidin. On this force, he writes:

*"I am the beauty running through the world... I was the bond that held together the foundations of the universe...I am the single radiance by which all is aroused and within which it is vibrant...I open the door to the whole heart of creation...Lying between God and the earth, as a zone of mutual attraction, I draw them both together in a passionate union...I am the Eternal Feminine."<sup>11</sup>*

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<sup>11</sup> Poem by Pierre Teilhard de Charidin (1881-1955) entitled 'The Eternal Feminine'. See also: Henri de Lubac (1971) *Eternal Feminine: A Study of the Poem by Teilhard de Chardin Followed by Teilhard and the Problems of Today* (New York: Collins).