We are happy to welcome JoAnne Lam, who will offer Mozaik a column related to the ongoing themes we are exploring. JoAnne has been engaged in the WSCF previously and now she is researching issues concerning the Eucharist. She is also blogging, raising two kids and engaging in ecumenism.

Is God a ‘He’ or a ‘She’?

Joanne Lam

“Certainly, God is a man! We call HIM the Father Almighty! I don’t know why is the minister saying ‘Mother and Father’ when she was referring to God?” Has there been a moment in your life that you either shared a similar thought or simply questioned the validity of challenging the ‘maleness’ of God in the Christian churches? It is a constant struggle to decipher how gender impacts our perceptions of God. The human tendency is to superimpose our frames of reference onto the One who ultimately created us. Is that not ironic? That is theology – humanity’s attempt to understand God.

To address the nature of God in the context of gender, a differentiation between ‘gender’ and ‘sex’ is necessary. Gender and sex are two different concepts that become mixed into one or used interchangeably. Sex identifies the biological assignment as male and female, while gender deals with social and cultural roles associated with the respective sex. Traditionally, masculinity embodies strength, protection, and trustworthiness. On the other hand, femininity portrays fragility, gentleness, beauty. The issue becomes prominent when these traits become assigned to the male and female sex respectively. To exclusively assign masculinity as a male characteristic and femininity as a female one limits the capacity to embody the fullness of each sex. Furthermore, these gender perceptions limit men as the providers and the authority figures within the patriarchal society, while the women become dependents and only significant in the matters of fertility and rearing children. Having a masculine God points to the human desire for a presence of protection and strength. Especially within a patriarchal society, power and authority rests with the men and how could God be a frail and powerless being when God possesses great authority over life and death? Although this explains one reason to label God to be male, it cannot justify the rejection that God is also female. To identify God with one gender significantly restricts God’s dynamic presence as all things to all peoples. Contrastingly, in matriarchal societies, this same argument can be applied and it would be interesting to survey if the language of God remains similar to patriarchal systems.

Now, to apply these identifiers of gender to the nature of God creates difficulties because the assumption has been that God would only embody one gender or the fact that God requires a gender. In the Trinitarian formula of “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” as well as the constant reference of God the Father throughout the Gospels reinforce the male gender of God as well as
the nature of the relationship between God to creation. Though I celebrate the naming of God as the fatherly presence in the world, the feminine and motherly presence should not be ignored. The creation story cannot be understood without the appreciation of the birthing process. The world’s lack of respect for the environment can be attributed to the entitlement to govern and dominate creation. However, to understand God as a mother to have given birth to creation, greater care and empathy may be inspired before corporations depose toxic wastes and governments reject such agreements as the Kyoto Protocol.

God is the source of humanity and in God is both female and male. Out of a formless void, God created and in ‘our’ image, God created the first human, Adam. From Adam materialized Eve and if we use simple mathematics to understand this, only with Adam and Eve together would the two become the full image of God. This understanding does not solve the issue of “so do we refer to God as ‘he’ or ‘she’?” To be honest, I do not believe there is an answer. Perhaps the issue is not to decide whether God is to be called a ‘he’ or a ‘she’, but rather to understand the implications of assigning a gender to God. Our languages have limitations when they are used to describe God. Even though in some languages, such as the Chinese language, the word God does not hold a gender, the usages of ‘Father’ as the divine personified continue to repress the necessary presence of ‘Mother’ language, especially in liturgy. God does not and cannot fit into a box that is shaped by human understandings. Instead, the mysteries of the Creator continue to engage us in discovering our relationship with the divine, the One whose image created the one humanity. Is it more important to understand the communion that God seeks to have with creation or to decipher if God is a ‘he’ or ‘she’? God is neither he nor she. God is love. God is grace. God is hospitality. God is all things to all people but one thing remains: God is GOD.

About the Author

JoAnne Chung Yan Lam is a Master of Divinity student at the Waterloo Lutheran Seminary in Canada. She has served as an intern at the WSCF-Geneva office in 2002-2003. She is a graduate from the Toronto School of Theology, Master of Theological Studies and the Ecumenical Institute of Bossey, Master of Advanced Ecumenical Studies programs. Her latest project was a thesis on the Lutheran-Orthodox dialogue on Eucharist. Her intercultural identity includes being born in Hong Kong, immigrated to Canada, and now residing in Switzerland. Email: ijklam@gmail.com.