

Feminine Forms of the Divine in Bahá'í Scriptures

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Abstract

The article responds to current feminist research in religious studies from a Bahá'í perspective. It answers the resurgence of a feminine divine in several religions by offering examples of the interaction between male and female principles in Bahá'í sacred writings. The complementarity of masculine and feminine images of divinity is understood as enriching our understanding of the divine-human encounter, but not as supplanting the unity and unknowability of God. The dynamic nature of masculine and feminine images of divinity sharply contrasts static concepts of divinity hardened by dogma and is offered as a pattern for the discussion of theological concepts in Bahá'í communities.

Résumé

Cet article se veut une réponse aux recherches féministes sur l'étude de la religion ayant cours actuellement selon une perspective bahá'íe. Répondant à la résurgence d'une divinité féminine dans plusieurs religions, il offre des exemples de l'interaction entre le principe masculin et le principe féminin dans les écrits sacrés bahá'ís. La complémentarité des images masculines et féminines de la divinité est perçue comme pouvant enrichir notre compréhension de la relation entre le divin et l'humain, mais non comme supplantant l'unité et l'inconnaissable nature de Dieu. La nature dynamique des images masculines et féminines de la divinité contraste vivement avec les concepts statiques de la divinité figés par le dogme et est offerte comme point de départ à une discussion sur ces concepts théologiques dans les communautés bahá'íes.

Resumen

Esta disertación da tratamiento a la investigación feminista de actualidad de estudios religiosos, mirándolo desde una perspectiva bahá'í. Hace respuesta al resurgimiento de un femenino divino en varias religiones ofreciendo ejemplos de la interacción entre los principios masculinos y femeninos contenidos en los escritos sagrados bahá'ís. Se da por entendido en la complementariedad de las imágenes masculinas y femeninas de la divinidad, el enriquecimiento de nuestra comprensión del encuentro divino-humano, sin desalojar la unidad e inconocibilidad de Dios. La naturaleza dinámica de las imágenes masculinas y femeninas contrasta agudamente con los conceptos estáticos de la divinidad enderucidos por el dogma, y se ofrece como modelo para la discusión de conceptos teológicos en las comunidades bahá'ís.

Feminist writers in religious studies have for many years been finding ways to conceive of the divine world in feminine terms.¹ From Goldenberg's *Changing of the Gods* in 1979 to Gimbutas's *The Language of the Goddess* in 1989, we have seen a steady stream of women scholars and writers populating our collective consciousness with female images of divinity. Such feminist revisioning indicates cognizance of the very real power exerted by our cultural images of divinity on the human social fabric and impatience with males' getting all the good roles while females are reduced to support figures in the wings of the sacred stage. Such feminist revisioning is based on the assumption that it is necessary to include the feminine in our images of divinity if we are also to argue for her equal place in the social order.

Are there forms of the feminine divine that allow a feminist avenues to empowerment by association? Many modern writers are returning to feminine images of divinity derived from ancient goddesses—Earth Mother, Gaia. The Bahá'í writings satisfy the need for images of the feminine divine without returning to ancient goddess figures and offer mature images of feminine strength and power. To locate feminine images of divinity in material forms is, it seems to me, neither very integrative nor very liberating. Women have been associated with physical fecundity for thousands of years. Humanity's growth towards wholeness requires new images of *spiritual* fecundity. Furthermore, we will find the wholeness of divinity served by feminine forms in interaction with masculine forms.

1. A sampling of such re-creations from one reader reveals "Motherearth and the Megamachine," "What Became of God the Mother?," "When God Was a Woman," "Female God Language in a Jewish Context," "The Coming of Lilith: Towards a Feminist Theology," and "Why Women Need the Goddess" in *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion*.

Before turning to feminine forms of the divine found in Bahá'í scriptures, it is important to establish two features of Bahá'í theology that describe the territory within which such a discussion can occur: the impossibility of knowing God; and the Manifestations as avenues towards partial knowledge of God. For Bahá'ís, God is single, mysterious, and unknowable:

The door of the knowledge of the Ancient Being hath ever been, and will continue for ever to be, closed in the face of men. No man's understanding shall ever gain access unto His holy court. (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 49)

So, we have the conundrum that connection with the divine is sought in terms accessible to the human imagination, and yet these very forms belie the nature of divinity when taken to represent the whole. The *forms* through which we attempt to understand the divine are inadequate expressions of divinity.

Bahá'í teachings clarify the relationship between the unknowable, mysterious essence of the universe and the ways we gain partial knowledge of God through the concept of divine Manifestations:

As a token of His mercy, however, and as a proof of His loving-kindness, He hath manifested unto men the Day Stars of His divine guidance, the Symbols of His divine unity, and hath ordained the knowledge of these sanctified Beings to be identical with the knowledge of His own Self. (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 49–50)

These holy individuals are the repositories on earth of all the names and attributes of God, the signs of God on earth through whom we can know of and love the Unity of God:

These sanctified Mirrors, these Day Springs of ancient glory, are, one and all, the Exponents on earth of Him Who is the central Orb of the universe, its Essence and ultimate Purpose. From Him proceed their knowledge and power; from Him is derived their sovereignty. The beauty of their countenance is but a reflection of His image.... These Tabernacles of Holiness, these Primal Mirrors which reflect the light of unfading glory, are but expressions of Him Who is the Invisible of the Invisibles. By the revelation of these Gems of Divine virtue all the names and attributes of God ... are made manifest. (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 47–48)

Furthermore, Bahá'ís are warned against making value distinctions between any of the Manifestations that would undermine the Unity of God:

Beware, O believers in the Unity of God, lest ye be tempted to make any distinction between any of the Manifestations of His Cause, or to discriminate against the signs that have accompanied and proclaimed their Revelation. This indeed is the true meaning of Divine Unity.... (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 59) .

Elsewhere we are told that divine unity “consisteth in regarding Him Who is the Manifestation of God and Him Who is the invisible, the inaccessible, the unknowable Essence as one and the same” (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 167). The Manifestations are the forms through which humans learn of God. They are not incarnations, but “Mirrors” of God. We can know of God through his names and attributes, but God remains inaccessible and exalted beyond all that can be spoken of or perceived. Yet, the Manifestations are not the only forms through which the divinity is expressed in Bahá'í scriptures.

There are powerful new models of feminine strength and richness in several literary images through which the divine Beauty is expressed in the Bahá'í scriptures. But, first, a few words of caution. While the Manifestations are the signs of God on earth, we must beware of God-ideas that come only from our imaginations. In contrast to the unitary and unknowable essence of the godhead, the world of “names and forms” we inhabit is multiple. It contains multiple masks, which both reveal and disguise the world of divinity.

Yet as humans we need to relate to spirit in some form accessible to human understanding. The masks or images through which we glimpse divinity have become fixed in masculine forms in the religions of the West. Hence the feminist's perceptions of exclusion from the ultimate values, or at least the ways we conceive those ultimate values. Since any “God-talk” is prone to idolatry, in discussing *forms* of the divine, we had better be cognizant of potential dangers: The images or forms of God cannot be confused with the truth they are intended to convey. That truth is beyond human comprehension. Bahá'í writings counsel humanity to “tear asunder, in My Name, the veils that have grievously blinded your vision, and, through the power born of your belief in the unity of God, scatter the idols of vain imitation” (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 143). To avoid the idols created by our own vain imaginings, we are counseled to “sanctify [our] souls from whatsoever is not of God...” (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 143). The best we can do is to confess our helplessness to comprehend the mystery of divinity. Bahá'u'lláh tells us this is the acme of

human understanding: to know that you cannot know. To declare otherwise is to limit and restrict God. Having acknowledged the unity of God and his Manifestations and the dangers of idolatry, the rich world of feminine imagery in Bahá'í texts beckons the reader.

What is Gender?

The Winter, 1991, issue of *Women of Power* declares that “woman’s spirituality is a world-wide awakening of womanpower whose vision is the transformation of our selves and our societies” (1). Today, feminists want feminine forms of the divine that satisfy our desires for power, sovereignty, authority, wisdom, and the like—those qualities formerly appropriated by men. Yet our quest for gender equity is colored by a cultural and historical context that shapes our perceptions and understanding of gender issues. So what does gender mean in connection with feminine images of the divine? Its context is not a natural one since the divine admits of no distinction of sex as a physical expression. Rather, I am using gender in its sociocultural context. The *Oxford English Dictionary* says of the feminist usage of gender, “Euphemism for the sex of a human being, often intended to emphasize the social and cultural as opposed to the biological distinctions between the sexes.” In *Sex, Gender and Society*, Ann Oakley writes, “Sex differences may be natural, but gender differences have their source in culture” (189). I am responding to feminists who use gender as a cultural construct. Like a prism, the cultural lens breaks down the divine reflection into its component features and into multiple names and forms. So today we have multiple goddess figures from all possible cultural and religious legacies who are empowering women to recapture spiritual qualities such as knowledge and power. I am interested in finding in the Bahá'í scriptures examples of the feminine divine that enrich our understanding of the multiple names and forms of the divinity without tying it to political and cultural contexts.

Feminine Images of the Divine in Bahá'í Scripture

The feminine divine is prominent in Bahá'í scripture in several forms; I will focus on three of these forms—the creative or Mother Word; the Queen of Carmel; and the Maid of Heaven. In each case, feminine principles interact with masculine principles, and their interaction emphasizes complementarity, more akin to yin and yang than to Western dualism. The context is not either/or, but both/and. This shift from a dualistic to a paradoxical framework of balancing, rather than of competing opposites, is the model for the interaction of masculine and feminine referents in Bahá'í scripture as they relate to forms of divinity.

As Mother Word

The distinctions as to sex in Bahá'í scriptures allow us to see the feminine divine not as an image that reflects the projections and wishes of our cultural understandings, but as an *active principle*; which creates, empowers, rears, and nourishes. Power is identified with procreation in this explanation from Bahá'í scriptures:

. . . the moment the word expressing My attribute “The Omniscient” issueth forth from My mouth, every created thing will, according to its capacity and limitations, be invested with the power to unfold the knowledge of the most marvelous sciences, and will be empowered to manifest them in the course of time at the bidding of Him Who is the Almighty, the All-Knowing. Know thou of a certainty that the Revelation of every other Name is accompanied by a similar manifestation of Divine power. Every single letter proceeding out of the mouth of God is indeed a mother letter, and every word uttered by Him Who is the Well Spring of Divine Revelation is a mother word, and His Tablet a Mother Tablet. (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 142)

The mothering images are used to suggest the divine creative principle of the Word of God. Bahá'u'lláh identifies the feminine powers of God with the word *Fashioner*:

No sooner is this resplendent word uttered, than its animating energies, stirring within all created things, give birth to the means and instruments whereby such arts can be produced and perfected. All the wondrous achievements ye now witness are the direct consequences of the Revelation of this Name. (*Gleanings* 142)

Here the divine feminine is identified with the *power* of creation, not with a fixed condition of sexuality applied to objects in the created world. In yet another passage, Bahá'u'lláh refers to the animating properties of the Word, when uttered by humans:

Whoso reciteth . . . the verses revealed by God, the scattering angels of the Almighty shall scatter abroad the fragrance of the words uttered by his mouth, and shall cause the heart of every righteous man to throb. (*Gleanings* 295)

As divine revelation, “The Word of God hath set the heart of the world afire ...” (Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings* 316). It is the channel of divine power, of transformation, of the change of heart leading to the inclination towards God, as well as of the wonderful arts and sciences on which civilization prides itself. It is the power of life in the world of creation. The power of creation of the Mother Word lends an interactive and dynamic dimension to the feminine divine. “Should the Word be allowed to release suddenly all the energies latent within it, no man could sustain the weight of so mighty a Revelation” (Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings* 76–77). Hence, the Word is released in relation to the capacity of its hearers.

Tablet of Carmel

In the Tablet of Carmel (Bahá’u’lláh, *Tablets* 3–5) we have a divine dramatization of two forces coming together: the Ancient of Days as the Manifestation and a feminine personification of the Mountain of God, the Queen of Carmel, the site of the Manifestation’s holy seat or throne. The tablet resembles a courtship dance with feelings of separation and longing for reunion followed by movements ever closer culminating in a consummation recalling the divine marriage of heaven and earth, a theme to be found throughout the Western religions. The wedding dance closes with a circling around the sacred spot and tidings of rejoicing moving out to the entire earth as “both land and sea rejoice at this announcement ...” (Bahá’u’lláh, *Tablets* 5).

I have described the pattern of development in this tablet as a dance-drama because it alternates successively between a divine call and an earthly response. The holy mountain responds to the summons: “Haste thee, O Carmel, for lo, the light of the countenance of God, the Ruler of the Kingdom of Names and Fashioner of the heavens, hath been lifted upon thee” (3). Note how God is personalized in this drama by reference to his countenance. Next, the terms “Ruler” and “Fashioner” suggest masculine divinity. Carmel responds as a lover: “Seized with transports of joy, and raising high her voice, she thus exclaimed: ‘May my life be a sacrifice to Thee, inasmuch as Thou hast fixed Thy gaze upon me, hast bestowed upon me Thy bounty, and hast directed towards me Thy steps’” (3). The personal quality of association and movement is touched by “raising ... her voice” and receiving his “gaze” and “steps.” Then, she laments her separation from him and is quickened to life by “the vitalizing fragrance of Thy Day” and “the shrilling voice of Thy Pen ...” (3). The entire creation “shakes” in response to this Pen. Here, the Word of God, symbolized by the Pen, is a masculine force identified with the potent forces, which quicken all earth to life “when the ocean of My presence surged before thy face, cheering thine eyes and those of all creation, and filling with delight all things visible and invisible” (4). The earth receives her Lord as Lover. Her “body” is identified with the revelation of his glory: “Well is it with him that circleth around thee, that proclaimeth the revelation of thy glory, and recounteth that which the bounty of the Lord thy God hath showered upon thee” (4). This same meeting has “turned thy sorrow into gladness, and transmuted thy grief into blissful joy” (4). In response, the holy mountain is to give thanks and to “callout to Zion ...and announce the joyful tidings: He that was hidden from mortal eyes is come! His all-conquering sovereignty is manifest; His all-encompassing splendour is revealed” (4). The majesty of the masculine images of sovereignty and splendor meets with the actively receptive images of listening, quickening, delight, and thanksgiving. “... all the atoms of the earth have been made to vibrate” in response to this reunion and “the Tongue of Grandeur hath been moved to disclose that which had been wrapt in His knowledge and lay concealed within the treasury of His might” (5). The forces now disclosed from hiding resemble the children issuing forth from the divine meeting. At length “will God sail His Ark upon thee, and will manifest the people of Bahá ...” (5).

The feminine divine in this tablet is the holy mountain of God destined to reveal God’s splendors, hence, she is identified with Earth. Their reunion will “manifest the people of Bahá,” the children of this divine marriage. Interaction of masculine and feminine images is once again central to the fertility characterized by consummation. The dance-like call and response weaves these elements together until they are nearly indistinguishable, illustrating our theme of masculine–feminine complementarity and interaction.

The Maid of Heaven

The most pervasive feminine images of divinity and the most personally meaningful to me are those portraying the Maid of Heaven as the personification of the Holy Spirit. The attractive or charismatic features of both male and female find their source in the Creator of all life. Male and female imagery is wedded in the partnering of the Manifestation, Bahá’u’lláh, as the King of Glory, with his mystical partner as the Maid of Heaven. Beginning with her appearance to Bahá’u’lláh in the Síyáh-Chál prison, she embodies connection to God in a form of luminous beauty whose central characteristics are joy, brightness, purity, and glory. She calls to Bahá’u’lláh in “a most sweet voice”:

Turning My face, I beheld a Maiden ... suspended in the air before Me; So rejoiced was she in her very soul that

her countenance shone with the ornament of the good pleasure of God.... (Bahá'u'lláh, quoted in Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* 101–2)

Her appearance personifies two themes in the relationship of Creator and creatures: the splendor of the hidden is made manifest, and the Manifestation discloses or unveils the beauty and attractiveness of the revelation of God. Both themes require interaction of male and female principles. Note the conjoining of opposites as she continues:

Betwixt earth and heaven she was raising a call which captivated the hearts and minds of men. She was imparting to both My inward and outer being tidings which rejoiced My soul, and the souls of God's honored servants. (102)

The beauty and attractiveness of the Manifestation is emphasized as she proclaims:

By God! This is the Best-Beloved of the worlds.... This is the Beauty of God amongst you, and the power of His sovereignty within you, could ye but understand. (102)

The creative connotations of the female principle commingling with the male in a kind of mystical coitus, complete with heavenly womb, is found in another appearance of the Maid of Heaven from the writings of the Báb:

By the righteousness of the One true God, I am the Maid of Heaven begotten by the Spirit of Bahá, abiding within the Mansion hewn out of a mass of ruby, tender and vibrant. . . (*Selected Writings of the Báb* 54)

The most extended imagery of the Maid of Heaven is found in *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*. We are prepared for the grand entry of this Maid by references to previous revelations, recalling the radiance of Sinai splendor in its lightening glimpse of crimson light. Then she enters by the command of God. Light and immortality become the enduring features of her apparel: "Drape thyself in whatever manner pleaseth Thee in the silken Vesture of Immortality, and put on, in the name of the All-Glorious, the brodered Robe of Light" (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 282–83). The silken vesture recalls Táhirih's nuptial garments. Our vision having been awakened, the next command is directed towards Our ears: "Hear, then, the sweet, the wondrous accent of the Voice that cometh from the Throne of Thy Lord, the Inaccessible, the Most High" (283). Next, her countenance is to be unveiled to reveal the beauty associated with a black-eyed damsel, an image that will be familiar to students of the Qur'án as a description associated with the heavenly *houris*. The veil is a symbol of modesty and chastity and is a characteristic especially associated with the feminine in Bahá'í scriptures. Likewise, the veil of God's Revelation is always the mysterious and unexpected circumstances of its appearance. It appears counter to the hopes, desires, and preconceptions of the majority of people.

The Maid of Heaven uses the beauty of physical and sensual attributes as a gateway, a door to the Revelation. The sensual nature is to awaken our consciousness of the beauty and attractiveness of the attributes of God. The Maid image addresses all the dwellers of heaven and earth in a stunning image compressing sound, sight, light, and longing into a majestic presence that leaves paradise quivering in expectation. This is no ethereal or sterile feminine. She commands our senses and joins them to spiritual purpose—the heart's attraction to the beauty of God.

The attractiveness of the Maid of Heaven refocuses creative power in a dimension of spiritual fecundity. Women have been associated with physical fecundity for thousands of years. As such it serves as a vehicle that enables us to transcend our present limitations and tap into the root of transformation—the feminine power of Revelation to give birth, to create anew. The Maid of Heaven continues the personification of the feminine as the new Eve. More than creature, she is the power of Creation—the power without which seeds do not grow, attraction is not generated, human culture does not develop. She is to awaken in us a sense of our beginnings and directions as we endeavor to formulate and express them in the world of creation.

In several tablets revealed in Baghdad, Bahá'u'lláh describes his relationship with the Maid of Heaven as part of the process of the intermingling or complementarity of male *and* female principles. In the Tablet of the Maiden (*Lawh-i-Húriyyih*) and The Wondrous Maiden (*Húr-i-'Ujáb*), both untranslated into English from Arabic, "He portrays in dramatic terms the appearance before Him of the 'Maid of Heaven', personifying the 'Most Great Spirit'..." (Taherzadeh, *Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh* 1:213). Taherzadeh says, "The dialogue between the two is fascinating. It reveals, on the one hand, the unique station of Bahá'u'lláh and, on the other, the afflictions which had befallen Him through the misdeeds of a perverse generation" (125). The divine attributes are depicted "as if in a sublime drama" (125). It is interesting that Taherzadeh describes Bahá'u'lláh's relation with the Maid as a dialogue, since this form is also the dramatic device in the Queen of Carmel image and emphasizes the theme of

complementarity. Elsewhere, Bahá'u'lláh speaks of the Maids of Heaven as celestial inhabitants (Tablet of the Holy Mariner; *Gleanings* 32, 136, 327; *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh* 189).

Conclusion

Consonant with Western religious tradition, the Bahá'í scriptures associate the feminine divine with heavenly sources and spiritually potent forms, in stark contrast to some modern feminists who wish to embody the feminine divine in tangible or earthly images. The major earth-reference is the power identified with the creative Word as the Mother of Life. We are all children nurtured to our individual expressions of spirituality through partaking “every morn and eve” of the Mother Word. It gives life to us and continues to nourish our growth through all stages of life. Our maleness or femaleness is not important to this relationship. We are all as children at the breast, taking our fill. In this form, the divine may be taken within humanity—may be eaten, absorbed, ingested, and digested—to be expressed outwardly in deeds of service.

How do I as a feminist regard the divine feminine images in Bahá'í scripture? They preserve and nurture feminine qualities such as beauty, purity, fecundity, and luminosity without trivializing them in forms that are too defined and limiting. Such forms bear the danger of reifying images of divinity by catering to fashions of the period. By providing us with multiple images of a single divine spirit, the Bahá'í writings point away from gender as a primary point of identity and towards multiple spiritual attributes and qualities. The diversity of these qualities gives us a more comprehensive understanding of God and of our own growth potential than single-sex images could ever provide.

Forms of the divine feminine invite the continuing dialogue between the sexes, suggested by the interactive dynamism of male and female imagery in the Bahá'í writings. This dialogue protects us from the tyranny of either sex by giving us the vision within which to process and understand the social changes we will confront. Such a dialogue emphasizes the foremost importance of unity in the consultative process, and preserves the balance of male and female attributes and characteristics. Instead of being divided and polarized, masculine and feminine attributes are united in the social body we all share. The process of change in concert leaves little room for entrenched positions of the sexes behind an imaginary firing line. The worlds of divinity revealed by Bahá'u'lláh have reinvested our understanding of God with mythic and symbolic catalysts to empower our spiritual *and* social growth.

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My comments referring to current feminist thought in the study of religion are based upon the following presentations at a conference entitled: “Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and Religion” held at the University of Ottawa, March 15, 1991. The papers delivered are to be published in future:

- Goldenberg, Naomi. “Returning Words to Flesh.”
- Lutzky, Harriet. “La Construction de sacre et les rapport sociaux de sexe.”
- Sharp, Carolyn. “Luce Irigaray’s Search for Women’s Own Divinity.”

Tomm, Winnifred. "Embodied spiritual consciousness: Beyond Psychology."

Warne, Randi. "Speaking/Creating Reality: Religion, Feminism and Cultural Transformation."

Young, Pamela. "The Resurrection of Whose Body? Another Look at the Question of Transcendence." .