

# What if We Imagined God as a Woman?



[Mike Rivage-Seul](#) | February 6, 2016

*[Presented here in full with the permission of the author.]*

Have you ever seen Eve Ensler's "Vagina Monologues?" A few years ago that series of dramatic readings was presented at Berea College where I taught for 40 years. The readings were as provocative as the play's title. All of them reflect

the unique experience of being woman that most of us Christian males find so difficult to understand, especially after so many years of brain-washing at the hands of predominantly male clergies.

I bring that up because today's liturgy of the word (5th Sunday in Ordinary Time: Is. 6:1-2a, 3-8; Ps. 138: 1-5, 7-8; I Cor. 15: 1-11; Lk. 5: 1-11) is so obviously male-centered in a very misleading way. The readings of the day suggest that God is male and that Jesus' and Paul's closest collaborators were exclusively men. And that in turn explains why Christian pastors of so many denominations participate so enthusiastically in what has been called a 21st century "War on Women." It explains why the Catholic Church is so afraid of women priests.

Significantly, Ensler refers to that particular male prejudice in the prologue to her *Vagina*

Monologues text. There she quotes Gloria Steinem who recalls:

“In the sixties, while I was doing research in the Library of Congress, I found a little known treatise about the history of religious architecture which blithely stated a thesis, as it were known by everybody, to the effect that the traditional shape of most patriarchal buildings of worship imitates the female body. Thus, there is an external entrance and another internal one, the labia majora and the labia minora; there is a vaginal central nave, which leads to the altar; there are two curved ovarian structures on either side; and finally, in the sacred center is the altar or uterus, where the great miracle takes place: men give birth.

“Though this comparison was new for me, it opened my eyes with a shock. Of course, I thought. The central ceremony of the patriarchal religions is

nothing else but the ceremony in which men take control of the “yoni” power of creation by giving birth symbolically. It is no wonder that male religious leaders state so often that we human beings are born in sin ... because we are born from female tummies. Only by obeying the rules of the patriarchy can we be “reborn” through men. It is no wonder that priests and pastors decked out in long vestments sprinkle our heads with a fluid that mimics the waters of birth. It is no wonder that they give us new names and promise us we will be reborn in eternal life. It is no wonder that the male priesthood attempts to keep women far removed from the altar, just as we are kept far removed from control of our own powers of reproduction. Whether symbolic or real, everything is aimed at controlling the power that resides in the female body.”

Talk about provocative! Here Ms. Steinem is

claiming that creative power is focused chiefly in the female body, though men obviously have an ancillary role in the begetting of life. Because their role is so obviously secondary, a primary patriarchal purpose in organized religion, Ms. Steinem says, is for men to alienate or steal the vastly superior womanly power of life and to control it – against women themselves.

Patriarchal religion accomplishes its task by dressing men up like women. It has them sprinkling their congregations with the waters of birth introducing them to “eternal life.” This form of life is held to be more important than physical life, and male pastors claim to control it to the exclusion of women. The prerequisite for women’s access to life eternal is that they adopt the rules of the exclusively male priesthood especially those connected with female powers of reproduction centered in the woman’s body whose architecture

the male priestly domain of church actually mimics.

Ms. Steinem's analysis suggests why someone even like our beloved Pope Francis seems skittish about women priests.

After all, female priests might inspire women to recognize their inherent superiority over men in terms of centrality to the life processes (both physical and spiritual) that the patriarchy struggles so mightily to control. If women were allowed the leadership that their biology suggests, what would become of the male-centered church – of the male-centered world?

Today's liturgy of the word tries to keep us from asking such questions. It begins with a description of God in highly masculine terms centered in the macho realm of palace and court. God is depicted

as “king.” He (sic!) is “Lord.” He inspires fear and awe. He dwells in a smoke-filled room surrounded by all the trappings of power and might. Like the prophet Isaiah, those who appear before him feel small and ashamed of the very words that come from their lips.

This, of course, is the image of God we’ve been offered from the cradle. (Can you imagine how different we’d feel personally, ecclesiastically, nationally and internationally if the familiar image of God were a mother nursing her child? Would you feel any different towards such a Mother God? – Remember, it’s all just symbolism. And the image of God that’s come to dominate arises from one of the most patriarchal traditions in the history of the world.)

The male-centeredness of today’s readings continues in the selection from Paul’s first letter to

Christians living in Corinth. It's a key passage because Paul is trying to establish his identity as an "apostle," even though he never met Jesus personally. Paul bases his claim on the fact that Jesus appeared to him just as he did to the other apostles. So he says "Remember what I preached to you:" Christ died for our sins. He was buried and raised on the third day. He appeared to the 12, then to 500 "brothers" at once, then to all of the apostles, and finally to Paul himself.

There is so much interesting in this summary of Paul's preaching. What, for instance, happened to Jesus' words and deeds? Paul's gospel begins with Jesus' death! What about Jesus' life which revealed the character of God as compassionate and "womb like?" (See Marcus Borg, Meeting Jesus again for the First Time, chapter 3.)

However, even more to the point is Paul's omission

of the fact that according to ALL of the accounts of Jesus' resurrection appearances in the canonical gospels, Jesus' first appearances were to women, not to men!! (Remember Jesus' appearance to Mary Magdalene in John 20:1-18?) Using Paul's logic, doesn't that establish the primacy of women in the church – and in the priesthood? The Paul of First Corinthians doesn't want to go near that question. And neither do most church officials.

And then we have today's gospel selection from Luke. It's the call of the first apostles. According to Luke, Peter, James, and John are the first to follow Jesus. That leaves us with the usual impression that Jesus called only men.

Omitted from our vision is the fact that according to Luke himself (8:3) there were “many women” taking an active part in the Jesus Movement. Besides Jesus' mother Mary, we know the names of

some of them: Mary Magdalene, several other Marys, Suzanne, Salome, Martha and Mary of Bethany, Joanna. . And the roles of these women weren't confined to preparing food and washing clothes.

In the first Christian communities, men and women met and worshiped together. Both men and women preached the message of Jesus with the same authority, and both men and women presided at the celebration in remembrance of their crucified Master. Like the men, the women had representation and decision-making power in the communities as priests and bishops.

That was even true of the communities of Paul. Paul himself taught that "In Christ there is no male or female" (Galatians 3,28). With this claim he legitimized the active participation of women in the first Christian communities. Also, he makes

emphatic mention of many women in his letters and lavishly praises their work. For example, he mentions by name the deaconess Phoebe (Romans 16,1), Junia (Romans 16,7), Prisca, Julia, Evodia and Sintece, all of whom he called his “collaborators” (Philippians 4,2). He also mentions Claudia, Trifena, Trifosa, Prisca, Lyida, Tiatira and Nympha of Laodicea. Of the 28 persons to whom Paul accords special praise in his letters to the early churches, 10 are women!

All of that changed in the 4th century, when Christianity lost its soul and became the official religion of the Roman Empire. Then Christianity adopted for good the courtly vision today’s first reading affirmed: macho-kings, courts, palaces, smoke-filled rooms, men dressed like women, denigration of women’s bodies, men trying desperately to affirm their superiority against all the evidence – of biology, life’s processes, Jesus’

own example, and women's traditional roles as nourishers, healers and spiritual counselors.

Let's talk about how women might take back those roles both in church and in politics. How do we help transform people as closed as today's church patriarchs – or as open as Pope Francis? How do we facilitate changes in our bishops and priests? How do we let go of our own acquiescence to the misogyny of our church and culture?