

Faith Meets Feminism: An Analysis of the Christian Belief in a Male God

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Despite the numerous existing accounts on the equality of sexes, feminists have openly expressed their dissatisfaction on the Christian doctrine of the image of God: To them, the reality is that, the world has always belonged to men. While trying to seek support from Holy Scripture, feminists decry prejudices in the Christian model which has so far, failed to provide a feminine imagery of God; this has caused an open clash between feminists' and Christians' views on the role of a male God in promoting equality of sexes. This paper presents biblical evidence of the image of God as an attempt to clarify the reliability of the Christian belief in a male God. While this study adopted a qualitative research design, the author used qualitative approach in the analysis of feminists' arguments against the patriarchal chauvinism observed in the Bible. The paper concludes that, Christian conception of a male omniscient and omnipotent Creator is not just a mere theorisation for it to be amended or reconceptualised, but a complete explanation of the believer's humility and submission to divine power and/or authority.

Keywords: feminism, image of God, patriarchal chauvinism, divine power, divine authority

Introduction

Historically, whatever God's true nature and identity may be, God has been experienced, conceived, and spoken of as masculine (Tracy & Cobb, 1983 as cited in Johnson, 1984). Tracy and Cobb add that, the aforementioned statement is applicable to both, metaphysical conception and religious image of God. Both, the Christian and universal usage understand by the name 'God' something greater than which nothing can be conceived (Aquinas, 1975, p. 9; Gen. 1:1-31; Mt. 6:6, 8, 9-13).

Background to the Study

Feminism basically deals with establishing equality between male and female sexes (Kakozi, 2022; Carpenter, 2018). Unfortunately, a male God has failed to administer justice to both, male and female sexes because he subjects women to male hierarchy as a subordinate (Moder, 2019; Ruether, 1993). From the above-mentioned feminist belief, should we reconceptualise the divine gender as a step to promoting women's interests? (Moder, 2019; Achtemeier, 1988) In feminists' view, the Christian idea of an omnipotent male God promotes injustice (Achtemeier, 1987). But saying that God's masculinity promotes injustice in any way whatsoever is against reason because it implies argument against divine benevolence (Aquinas, 1975; Gen. 1:31; Mt. 6:6-14, 7:7-11; Lk. 11:9-13).

However, if there is a God, one may argue, in virtue of divine love and perfection, the observed sexual prejudice among men runs counter to standing in right relationship to both the Creator and creation. This is where resides the real node of the feminist problem of the image of God. The *imago Dei* doctrine's problem to feminists is made manifest in the feminist scepticism about the presence and role of a male God as presented in Christian teachings.

Arguments put forth to refute Christian belief in a male God include:

1. Scripture defines women as being subordinate to men who are the principals (1).

The principals always have more rights than the subordinates (2).

Therefore, according to Scripture, men have more rights than women (3).

2. Women have simply been thought of as "other" than men. Since the "other" cannot be understood, the "other" can be disregarded or ignored (McLeod-Harrison, 2014; Fiorenza, 1975).

3. The Bible's use of masculine verbal images for the deity has been taken literally to legitimate the domination of women by men (Achteimeier, 1987).

Furthermore,

4. According to Christians, God is male (1).

Or, the Christian male God has failed to save women from male oppression and violence (2).

Therefore, we should reconstruct the image of God to get a Mother goddess; because, recovery of the feminine imagery of God can orient us to gender equality (Heo, 2015) (3).

And,

5. God is most accurately characterized as masculine (say) only if God is masculine and God is not equally feminine (...) God is not most accurately characterized as feminine (or as belonging to any other gender) (Rea, 2016)—inclusivism.

6. If God is masculine or feminine at all, then God is equally masculine and feminine (Rea, 2016)—inclusivism.

For what is the idea of the infinite, the unconditioned or the absolute but the idea of our own limits, which suggest to us both our transcendent goal and origin ...? (Barth, 1957) God is the clearest and distinct idea (Descartes, 1596-1650). Also, the existence of God is a self-evident truth (Aquinas, 1975). Therefore, the idea of a male God is, certainly, the most perfect idea in conceptualizing divine authority in the life of *fidelis*. However, has the Christian had interaction with God to know whether God is male or female? How certain is the Christian belief in a male God?

This study seeks to prove that the Christian conception of a male God is not a mere theorisation of the divine gender and authority; but a complete representation of the truth which transcends reason; and that the belief in a male Creator of the Universe is a divine gift deeply rooted in hearts of believers as it is confirmed by the Holy Scripture: "But the word is very nigh unto thee, in thy mouth, and in thy heart, that thou mayest do it" (Deut. 30:14, King James Bible).

But, some may think that points which reason is unable to investigate ought not to be proposed to man to believe, since divine wisdom provides for every being according to the measure of its nature (Aquinas, 1975); nevertheless, it is obvious that the truth of reason is not contrary to the truth of Christian faith (Aquinas, 1975). Thus, from the Christian point of view, God can be known with certainty by the natural light of reason from the things that he created (Second Vatican Council, 1962-1965; First Vatican Council 1869-1870; Rm. 1:20; Wis. 13:5). Again, God reveals himself to believers through his spirit (1 Cor. 2:10-11); and through his son Jesus

Christ (Mt. 11:27); hence, the belief in an omnipotent and omniscient male God does not divorce itself from the belief in Jesus Christ whom he sent (Mal. 3:1; Jn. 1:18, 3:13).

Problem Statement

Radical feminists see the Christian conception of a male God as positively promoting an oppressive patriarchal structure in the church community as Moder (2019) puts it: Many Christian feminist theologians question whether a “male” God can save women from their male-subjugated life of suffering; hence, they prove the need to reject Christian teachings as being male-oriented. Fiorenza (1975) eloquently argues, Scripture and theology express truth in sexist language and images and participate in the myth of their patriarchal sexist society and culture.

To overcome male chauvinism from all aspects of life including religious and moral aspects, feminists try to construct a female imagery of God with a view to facilitating the flourishing of women as ontologically equal to men as the *imago Dei* (Fiorenza, 1975). Feminists are currently talking of “She Who Is” which is a conception of an omniscient and omnipotent Mother goddess (Johnson, 2017; 2002; Ruether, 1993). And, according to Ariana Grande (2018), God is a Woman.

Hence, feminists are currently choosing to remain passive: ... I’ll give birth, if I want. And if I do not, let the human race become extinct! (Öğüt, 2018) According to Henry (2009), women are insisting that churches and theologians re-examine their image of God and their conception of Christian values and learn to talk about God in more creative way. Therefore, to feminists, the *imago Dei* doctrine is a human construction; and that, to them (feminists), it should be reconstructed.

Objective of the Study

The objective of this study was to analyse the reliability of the Christian belief in a male God and his duty in promoting gender equity.

Research Question

How certain is the Christian belief in a male God, and what is God’s duty in promoting gender equity?

Rationale of the Study

God is traditionally referred to as “he” and as “our heavenly Father”, for example; and even the figurative characterizations in Scripture and elsewhere (e.g., as the faithful husband of wayward Israel) are predominantly masculine (Rea, 2016). The New Testament is even more specific in describing God and his son Jesus Christ: According to the Bible, Jesus Christ is the son of God (Mt. 1:18-25, 2:1-23; Mk. 1:1; Lk. 1:26-32a, 4:9-12; Heb. 1:1-2). Again, Christ taught his disciples to call God “Father” when praying to him (Lk. 11:2-13).

Ideally, while it is agreed that divine benevolent nature can, in no way whatsoever, allow any kind of domination, oppression, and exploitation of one sex by the other; thinking that women are denied full humanity at the expense of males (Johnson, 2002; Ruether, 1993) would be to deny God’s right as the architect of the Universe (Gen. 1). The analysis of the Christian conception of a male God will help to clear feminists’ scepticism on the Christian conception of God in their effort to understand his role in promoting gender equity from the Christian point of view: God’s exceptional love for both, male and female is made manifest at creation of the Universe in Genesis 1, when God created both, man and woman equally in his own image.

Methodology

For a thorough analysis of the Christian belief in a male God as an attempt to clear feminists’ doubts on

the Christian conception of a male God, this study used literature survey method from professional articles and journals from studies conducted by prominent scholars. Furthermore, the consultation of the Christian Holy Scripture helped in the finding of the most logical deductions in proving the image of God. The study assessed the validity of the Christian belief in a male God in comparison to the feminists' claims of the need to either reconceptualise the image of God or attribute roles to a Mother goddess alongside the Creator (Christian male God).

For logical inferences, this study used a qualitative research approach. Qualitative research approach involves both, inductive and deductive methods of data analysis (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2009). Certainly, inductive and deductive methods are philosophical methods; hence, Singh (2006, p. 122) confesses, "the philosophical researches are conducted to establish truth or reality". Whereas there are three arguments presented in favour of the maleness of God, namely: the Traditional, Natural Reason, and Faith or Religion, the researcher relied more on logical inferences deduced from Natural Reason and Faith to explain patterns and preferences for easy interpretation of the findings of this study.

Results and Analysis

Results

This study found that, the truth about the image of God primarily transcends reason; it is therefore not a human construction; neither can it be. Secondly, both, the Ancient and the New Testaments attest the maleness of God. Lord Jesus Christ himself is seen in the New Testament instructing believers to refer to God as their "Father" (Mt. 6:9-13). Thus, according to Christ, God is "Male"; not "Female" as God personally introduced himself earlier on in the book of Exodus 3:13-14: "...He who is...". Aquinas (1975, p. 6) insightfully argues, "Whatever is put into the disciple's mind by the teacher is contained in the knowledge of the teacher unless the teacher is teaching dishonestly, which would be a wicked thing to say of God". Now if we agree that in his divine nature, Jesus Christ was free from any kind of flaw and deceit (Mt. 11:27; Jn. 1:18; Phil. 2:5-6), then it is obvious that, he (Jesus Christ) gave the true image of God when he instructed his disciples to refer to him as "Father".

Furthermore, this study noted the existing similarity between the truth of reason and the truth of faith, especially Christian faith in conceptualizing the image of God, as Henry (2009, p. 137) puts it when explaining how Christian theology conceptualises God, "God is King, Father, and Lord". The belief in a male God as conceptualised by Natural Reason and Faith implies the believer's submission to divine providence as it is clearly underlined in the Holy Scripture:

(...) For the Lord will again rejoice over thee for good, as he rejoiced over thy fathers: If thou shalt hearken unto the voice of the Lord thy God, to keep his commandments and his statutes which are written in this book of the law, and if thou turn unto the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul. (Deut. 30:9-10)

Thus, wanting a female supreme Mother goddess alongside the Creator is implicitly to deny God's mighty powers. On such, it is written: "As though the Almighty had no power, they reckoned of him" (Job 22:17). Consequently, this feminists' ill-attitude has had and will possibly continue to affect our community by negatively influencing the relationship between a believer and their Creator; and between a believer and their other. Thus, this study found that there is a great need for the creation of deep understanding of how men and women relate to their Creator.

Analysis

Rethinking on the divine ontology. As soon as we understand the idea of God, do we not understand that he must exist? (Gratsch, 1985) According to Descartes (1596-1650), the idea of God is the clearest and distinct idea; that's to say, it is a self-evidently true idea that cannot logically be doubted. Again, "From the greatness and beauty of created things, their original author is seen by analogy" (Wis. 13:5). And, "since the creation of the world, the invisible realities of God's eternal power and divinity have been made known through the things he has made" (Rom. 1:20).

Of course, that God exists is true to both, Christian believers and feminists. The dispute arises at the assertions on the image of God; that's to say, is God male or female? Christian conception of God is masculine (Lk. 11:2-13); however, why would a perfectly loving God insist on being characterized in this way if feminine characterizations are equally accurate? (Rea, 2016) Feminists are convinced that the Christian myth of a male God promotes inequality of sexes (Henry, 2009).

Hence, is the Christian belief in a male God a myth? Whereas radical feminists claim the reconceptualization of a female Mother goddess out of human social construction alongside the Christian male God, inclusivism advocates for a neutral imagery of God: If women are created in the image of God, then God can be spoken of in female metaphors in as full and limited a way as God is imaged in male ones (Johnson, 1993, p. 54 as cited in Rea, 2016). Masculine characterizations of God are no more or less accurate than feminine ones (Rea, 2016; Johnson, 1984).

The Scripture depicts God as mother, with all that this entails: pregnant with a child in her womb, crying out in labor, giving birth, nursing, carrying and cradling her child, comforting and having womb love for her child (Johnson, 1984). But, do these sufficiently evidence the need to conceptualize a Mother goddess equally or more powerful than the Christian male God? Or simply is this enough for us to declare that both, male and female are equal in their capacity to be the images of God? (Johnson, 1984)

To argue for the need to equally consider both sexes in depicting God, many feminist theologians mention Wisdom, the Greek Sophia, female, but refer to the Scripture as offering life, rest, knowledge, and salvation to those who accept her; she leads, preaches, corrects, sends prophets; she is called holy, all-powerful, intelligent, unique; she makes all things new (Wis. 7:22-30, 8, 9:1-2; Prov. 1:20- 33, 3:19, 8:1-31 as cited in Johnson, 1984).

But the Scripture also emphasizes that Jesus Christ is the true salvation for the believers (Jn. 3:16-18, 14:6-7; Acts 4:12-13, 16:30-31; Rom. 10:9; Tit. 3:5); nevertheless, in common parlance, we hear people saying, "the passengers' only salvation was their seat belt": Are they heretics? Again, at some points, the Scripture presents Christ as a new born male child (Mt. 2:9-11; Lk. 2:11-12). While asserting that Christ is truly God and truly man (Jn. 5:18, 10:30-33, 10:38; Mt. 26:63-65, 28:18-20; Phil. 2:5-11), does this suffice for the believers to portray the image of a newly born male child as God? If so, how many images of God should we have?

Hence, one can be tempted to think that, Christianity is a simplified form of pantheism. Nonetheless, Christianity is a monotheistic religion in which faith is built on the belief in one God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible (The Nicene Creed, A.D. 325; Gen. 1:26-28; Ex. 20:2-5; Mt. 6:9-13). In his divine missions, God transcends all categories of sexes, ages, and beings; he is, as one can truly declare, a spirit (Jn. 4:24; 1 Tim. 1:17; Rom. 1:29). Accordingly, one should not confuse the divine imagery to divine transcendence.

To avoid misinterpretation and keep neutrality, some Christian theologians argue for the incomprehensibility of God; they contend that, God is more truly than can be conceived, and is conceived more truly than can be expressed in speech (Johnson, 1984). But, if we agree that God is conceived more truly than can be expressed in speech; then, how can one posit that, “No created mind can comprehend the essence of God”? (Johnson, 1984, p. 451) Aquinas (1975) insists that our understanding is led to some knowledge of God, namely, of His existence and of other attributes that must necessarily be attributed to the First Cause [God]; and, that in God existence and essence is the same (p. 14).

Again, in order to logically build sufficient knowledge of anything, a logician should first and foremost apprehend the idea of that very thing; this mental operation consists in conceiving a mental image of what is known, an image which is always necessarily definite and finite. When Aquinas said that the highest human knowledge about God is to know that one knows nothing about God, he was not carrying forward the tradition of “divine incomprehensibility”; rather he was trying to exhort early Christians to devote themselves more to the search of knowledge about God as he puts it in his *Summa Theologiae*: [To know what God is], we must therefore consider the ways in which God does not exist, rather than the ways in which God does (Aquinas, 2005).

The foregoing assertion presupposes not that humans cannot know God; rather, that they can know God better through what he [Aquinas] calls ways of negation in addition to simple ways of affirmation which the many of us are used to. In addition to reason (cfr. the *Quinque viae*) through the *via negativa* or way of negation, and the *via affirmativa* or way of affirmation, another certain way to prove the existence of God, and by so doing, conceptualizing his image, is through Jesus Christ: “I have many things to say and to judge of you: but he that sent me is true; and I speak to the world those things which I have heard of him” (Jn. 8:26). Also, “...the Son can do nothing of himself, but what he seeth the Father do: for what things soever he doeth, these also doeth the Son likewise...” (Jn. 5:30)

Why then should one refute the Christian concept of a male God? Is refuting the maleness of God not tantamount to negating both, his mighty powers and existence? Typical defences of inclusivism assume either that the concept of God is a human invention or that divine transcendence precludes the literal application to God of just about any human term, thus making both masculine and feminine characterizations equally appropriate (Rea, 2016). What appears to be the strongest argument here is the “appeal to sexual prejudices in the Bible”.

Appeal to sexual prejudices in the Bible. Deeply rooted in Christian thought is the affirmation of the equivalence of maleness and femaleness in the image of God (Ruether, 1993). However, the problem arises when femaleness is correlated with the lower part of human nature in a hierarchical scheme of mind over the body and reason over passions (Ruether, 1993). What is of great concern to feminists is the fact that the Scripture promotes different themes which feminists regard as oppressing women’s freedom; such themes include marriage, motherhood, love, and even sexual intercourse (Gen. 1:26-28, 2:18, 20-25).

In a marriage union, for example, the Bible clearly insists on man’s authority at family level and in the church:

For a man indeed ought not to cover his head, for as much as he is the image and glory of God: but the woman is the glory of the man. For the man is not of the woman; but the woman of the man. Neither was the man created for the woman; but the woman for the man. For this cause ought the woman to have power on her head because of the angels. (1 Cor. 11:7-10)

On the biblical assertion that “man was not created for woman’s sake, but woman was created for man’s sake” (1 Cor. 11:7-10), biblical teachings are, to feminists, not only prejudiced, but also perverted (Johnson, 1984).

Against the aforementioned teachings, feminists’ movements are highly mobilised to advocate for anti-patriarchy to present different issues for the freedom of the female sex; amongst others, anti-patriarchists advocate for reproduction, expropriation of women’s labour in the domestic mode of production, compulsory heterosexuality, and men’s violence (Kakozi, 2022; Prasad et al., 2021; Ifechelobi, 2014; Adichie, 2014; Walby, 1989; Delphy, 1984; Rich, 1980; Brownmiller, 1975); and the essence of this feminists’ campaign is the liberation of the female sex from male oppression.

Appeal to feminists’ liberation theology. Liberation theology emphasizes more on the commitment to the liberation of oppressed people to make the Christian gospel more meaningful (Henry, 2009) (1).

The female sex suffers much from male oppressions (2).

As we are trying to understand God in order to enjoy his goodness, can’t we conceptualize a Mother goddess good and strong enough to liberate the female sex from all kinds of oppressions including male oppressions? (3) (feminists)

If God is really for the oppressed and marginalized people (Lk. 4:18), why does he keep women under male domination, oppression, and exploitation? (Walby, 1989) Is the fact that the God of Christianity is male not at the basis of the prejudiced social constructions which led to patriarchy in Christian community? Although the creation account given in Genesis 1 defines both, male and female equally as possessing the image of God, in reality, the world has always belonged to men... (Henry, 2009)

Christian teachings have been interpreted as justifying the supremacy of the male over the female and sexual hierarchy found in our society. According to Ruether (1985a), sexism exists as a universal system of marginalization of women within various cultures, and at every level, although it has taken different forms in different cultures and socio-economic systems and at different class levels. Our culture/cultural institutions increasingly allow women’s active participation, but usually in a subordinated way (Adichie, 2014; Walby, 1989).

Ruether (1993) asserts that liberalism interprets this not as a fall into bodily, finite existence, but as a fall into injustice. Hence, feminists are mobilizing themselves for the emancipation of the female sex: In their analysis of denotative and connotative meaning of Ariana Grande’s song “God Is a Woman”, Pratiwi, Indrayani, and Soemantri (2020) conclude that, from the overall meaning of the song, it means that women are likened to God and should have power in a love relationship. Pratiwi and colleagues confess that, the title and the lyrics have hidden meanings and reap a lot of controversy, one of which is Ariana allegedly defaming God; such is the case of verses like, “...so baby take my hand, save your soul...” and, “... and boy if you confess, you might get blessed” (Grande, 2018) in which the singer declares a woman as having the power to save a soul or grant anything to the one especially a person of the opposite sex; that’s to say, a man or boy as she uses the term.

The divine duty in the Universe. In his *Summa Theologiae* (1a.103-104), St. Thomas discusses God’s government and conservation of creatures: St. Thomas considers that, God maintains them in existence and directs them to the goal for which he created them. In some cases, God acts immediately, and in others he acts through the agency of creatures (Gratsch, 1985). The Holy Scripture casts light on God’s duty in the Universe: “Wisdom reacheth from one end to another mightily; and sweetly doth she order all things” (Ws. 8:1). This Wisdom is the breath of the power of God, and a pure influence flowing from the glory of the Almighty (Ws. 7:25).

Furthermore, God preserves all creatures including the evil ones (Mt. 5:44-45). Also, God keeps believers safe from all hard testing and the Evil one (Mt. 6:13). Just as a song is continually dependent upon the singer if it is to exist, so the creature is continually dependent upon God ... Sometimes God preserves human beings by means of light, air, warmth, and food (Gratsch, 1985).

From the above, we learn that the divine duty is a providential duty for God's creatures. Therefore, God can be seen not as a rank or a title, but as a duty or responsibility. The book of Exodus can serve as the best reflection of the life of a believer in accounting for the claim that divine duty is a providential duty intrinsic in God himself.

Conclusion

Despite the existing feminists' claims that Christian teachings not only undermine female humanity, but also deny woman's participation in the image of God (Johnson, 2017; 2002; Ruether, 1993), this study concludes that both, Christian teachings and reason put adequate emphasis on the equality of sexes: that women and men are made in the image of God, and that, in their essential nature, women have as much capacity of conscience and spiritual endowments as men do (Kakozi, 2022; Ruether, 1993, Gen. 1:26-27).

From the above explanation, both reason and Scripture want us to understand the existing hierarchical order in the context of Calvinists' teachings as follows: The subordination of women to men is not an expression of an inferiority either in nature or in fallen history; rather, it reflects the divinely created social order by which God has ordained the rule of some and the subjugation of others (Ruether, 1993). Hence, it is good as the Apostle Paul puts it, for women to remain under men's authority (1 Tim. 2:11); but, there is nothing morally good in subjugating females under males' oppression and exploitation; neither is there anything morally good in subjugating males under females' oppression and exploitation. Each sex is called to see the image of God in the other; hence living that good life full of happiness, love, care, and mutual preservation (Gen. 1).

Thus, feminists' effort to claim equality of women alongside men is ill or sinful rebellion against God's divinely enacted ordinances of creation and redemption (Kakozi, 2022; Ruether, 1993). And, wanting an omniscient and omnipotent Mother goddess alongside God the Father, is to implicitly deny God's supremacy over any existence or being whatsoever and Jesus Christ whom he sent:

By claiming an image of God as the feminine Spirit-Sophia, Schüssler Fiorenza and Ruether do away with Jesus' maleness as bearing theological significance (...) These feminist Christologies distance themselves from the classical atonement theories in their depiction of violence and suffering ordained by a male God by reclaiming not only feminine language for God, but a female deity in Sophia—or God/ess (Moder, 2019, p. 99).

For Mueller and Barth, man can neither know that he is a sinner nor that he is created in the image of God apart from faith in Jesus Christ (Mueller & Barth, 1972 as cited in Lidums, 2004). To emphasize the above-mentioned understanding, the Gospel of Mathew is very clear as follows: "All things are delivered unto me by my Father: and no man knoweth the Son, but the Father; neither knoweth any man the Father, save the Son, and he to whomsoever the son will reveal him" (Mt. 11:27). The only duty for the believer is to ask divine grace for the Son to reveal holy mysteries to them.

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