

Christian Feminist Theology in Japan¹

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At the beginning of 20th century, a Japanese activist and poet Raicho Hiratsuka sang a poem, enthusiastically encouraging women to "regain" themselves and rise up again.²

Originally, woman was the Sun.
She was an authentic person.
But now woman is the moon.
She lives by depending on another
and she shines by reflecting another light.
Her face has a sickly pallor.

We must now regain our hidden sun.
"Reveal our hidden sun!
Rediscover our natural gifts!"
This is the ceaseless Cry
Which forces itself into our hearts;
and unquenchable desire.

It is our final, complete, and only instinct
through which our various separate instincts are unified.

At the end of the 20th century, Chung Hyun Kyung, a Korean theologian who lives in the US, quoted this poem in her book, saying that Asian women "dream of a new world where woman is not the moon. Rather they want to become the sun who shines in its own light out of its burning core of life, fostering life on the earth."³ Thus, she named her book after the poem as "Struggle to be the Sun Again." Indeed, this phrase aptly expresses Asian women's theologies in their diversity. Japanese women, whose life contexts are very different from other Asian women, still share in this aspiration and the struggle to be the sun again together with their Asian sisters.

Also at the end of 20th century, a Japanese Christian activist Yayori Matsui greeted the audience in her speech at the 4th International Interdisciplinary Conference of Women in New York (1990), with the following words: "I come to you from Japan, not the country of the rising sun but the country of the rising daughters, because

¹ This paper is modified and developed from my article, "Christianity and Women in Japan" in Japanese Journal of Religious Studies: Feminism and Religion in Contemporary Japan (Eds., Noriko Kawahashi & Masako Kuroki, 30/3-4, 2003), pp.315-338. I would like to express my gratitude to my friend Alison Gray who edited this paper.

² Raicho Hisatsuka, "The Hidden Sun" in Seito (Blue Stockings) #1, 1911.9.1. At that time many Japanese women were actually rising up for personal fulfillment as well as in political resistance movements. Unfortunately, such movements were repressed and not a few women were persecuted as the Japanese government rushed into the age of invasions and worldwars.

³ Chung Hyun Kyung, Struggle to be the Sun Again: Introducing Asian Women's Theology (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1992), p.51.

Japanese women are breaking out of the stereotypical image of calm, docile women who are happy to serve their menfolk."⁴

As she states, since about 1975, International Women's Year, women's actions have become very visible in Japanese society, especially surrounding the issues of war, peace, nuclear proliferation, the environment, human rights, and equality. Yet, Japanese society now looks like taking the road back to the war age, standing at the verge of abandoning its "peace constitution" after almost 60 years' firm and broad national support. In such times as this, the political right gains power and women always suffer a severe backlash, not only in society in general but also in the church. Thus, our "struggle to be the Sun again" continues. I believe, however, women now have more experiential wisdom as well as much broader networks to support and sustain their struggles together, in general and also in the church.

In this paper, after a brief introduction to the situation of Christian women in Japan, I would like to introduce some of the more specifically feminist theological movements that are occurring beyond denominational differences in Japan. Lastly, as an example of such movements, I will introduce a feminist theological center in more details.

I. Christian Women in Japan

Christianity was first introduced to Japan by western missionaries in the 16th century, but was soon banned by the government, which feared political, economic, and spiritual colonization by the west. During two centuries of self-imposed seclusion, the government decided to consolidate a unifying spirituality or ideology for the nation, and propagated Shintoism as representing the genuine ancient Japanese spirituality. When Japan opened its doors to the west in the 19th century, Christianity was introduced again, giving the impression that Christianity represented western culture and religion."⁵

In fact, Christianity in Japan has always been dominated by European (mostly German) elite white male theologies. As a result, church women have long harbored the feeling that they are offered only second class citizenship in our faith communities in terms of both their ethnicity and their gender. Many women, however, did not know how to express or deal with their questions."⁶

⁴ Yayori Matsui, "Violence Against Women in Development, Militarism and Culture" in *In God's Image* 10/4 (1991) 22-28; 22. Here I would like to express my sincere regret for her recent death of cancer on December 27, 2002, at the age of 68. Her name Yayori derives from the words, "to live accordingly to Jesus," and she lived her life in such a way to the end, following her favorite biblical verse, "Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my siblings, you did it to me" (Mt. 25:40; my translation). Taking just one example, without her commitment it would have been much more difficult for the project "Women's International War Crimes Tribunal 2000 for the Trial of Japanese Military Sexual Slavery" in Tokyo to have been realised. Now many women and men are working for the realization of her will to build a women's museum of war and peace in Tokyo.

⁵ Satoko Yamaguchi, "The Impact of National Histories on the Politics of Identity: The Second Story" in *Journal of Asian and Asian American Theology* 2/1 (1997), pp.101-107; "The Invention of Traditions: The Case of Shintoism in *In God's Image* 18/4 (1998), pp.40-46.

⁶ Satoko Yamaguchi, "Original Christian Messages and Our Christian Identities" in *IGI*16/4 (1997), pp. 24-31; *Mary & Martha: Women in the World of Jesus* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2002), pp. ix, 142-144.

In church, women are in the numerical majority, and women, not men, have always taken most of the responsibility for practical matters in church activities. Many of them are also active leaders and participants in various social movements. Nevertheless, women remain in the minority in decision-making positions, such as heads of committees and boards, in the church. Moreover, while women are the majority in the active task force, it is not unusual that men are nominated as representatives of many groups and movements, despite their poor participation. This tendency results in women's invisibility even in today's church annals, which record only representative's names in annual church reports.⁷

Social activities, in which Christian women especially have made significant contributions, include those opposing the general "common sense" attitudes towards male sex-buying and sex-tourism, those building shelters and offering various support for immigrant workers as well as DV-victimized (and homeless) women, and the movement that obtained victory at the Women's International War Crimes Tribunal 2000 for the Trial of Japanese Military Sexual Slavery" in Tokyo.⁸

However, when it came to the issues surrounding sexual equality and gender-roles in the church, Christian women were slow to stand up. Most women had accepted dualistic gender concepts and roles as divinely ordained, or remained silent without knowing how to refute such teachings. This is one of the major reasons that, while a growing number of non-Christian women visit the church in their spiritual thirst, most of them leave the church with similar disappointment. They would say, "We were attracted to the teaching that in Christianity there is no male and female in Christ. But when we participated in church services and activities, we found that the basic church structure is no different than in society: men speak while women listen, and men make decisions in meeting rooms while women stand in the kitchen." Surely, church-going women are doubly pushed, not only by Japanese culture/society but also by the church, to accept the dualistic gender concept as natural or divinely given. There are few ministers who are sensitized to these "women's" concerns. The church has not been responding to the spiritual thirst of these women, either.

Finally, since about 1985, increasing number of churchgoing women began voicing their honest questions at women's gatherings. It became clear that many women had many questions about ministers' sermons and Bible studies. A variety of church

⁷ Here I would like to share with you a personal experience regarding the issue of male names representing activities that are carried out mostly by women. In my book, *Mary & Martha*, there is a section in which I referred to the New Prophecy movement in early Christianity. This is a movement that two women, Maximilla and Priscilla, initiated, and later included a man, Montanus, into their co-leadership. However, the group is known to us as "Montanist," the initial two women leaders being identified as the followers of the male co-leader Montanus. In my book (English version), the most important reference regarding this point was dropped out from its endnote [The correct reference is: Karen Jo Torgesen, "Reconstruction of Women's Early Christian History" in *Searching the Scriptures* (Ed., Elisabeth Schüsler Fiorenza, New York: Crossroad, 1993), pp. 1: 290-310; 298). So, I used a website of "Women's Alliance in Theology, Ethics, and Ritual" in order to reach out and inform many of my readers the correct reference, and at the same time to offer a similar example in today's Japan. To my surprise, I received many email responses from the US, mentioning that there are abundant similar examples even in today's US. If this is the case, I imagine there are numerous similar examples in Asian countries where the gender-role notion (men outside vs. women inside) is stronger, although contrary to the reality in many aspects.

⁸ Regarding women's shelters, Japan Christian Women's Temperance Union has been the most powerful taskforce since 1886. Regarding the "comfort women" issue, the victory at the international court is really a crucial one, but this does not mark the end of the issue. We are still continuing our struggle to establish justice in the daily lives of these women.

women's groups were born. They crossed the boundaries of church and denominational differences. Women gathered together to discuss and to question sexist customs and teachings in church.

Nevertheless, the transformation of the church has proceeded quite slowly. One of the reasons for this was that many of these women had ambivalent feelings toward their own challenges. They asked themselves whether it was not presumptuous for lay persons with no theological education to dispute their ministers' messages and biblical interpretations.

In addition, because the authority of the Bible has been unquestioned in churches in Japan, any questioning of biblical teaching was liable to be interpreted as lack of faith. Questioning or criticizing biblical interpretations only is somehow acceptable for many church people. The most difficult challenge for the majority of church women (and men) has been critical reading of the biblical texts themselves, especially the application of the "hermeneutics of suspicion" to biblical texts.⁹

Furthermore, many women cannot free themselves from the anxiety of going astray into heresy by challenging church traditions or by questioning biblical passages. In Japan, Christians have always been a tiny minority group, comprising only one percent of the whole population.¹⁰ Churches stand in the midst of a non-Christian culture, surrounded by different religious traditions that have a much longer history and larger membership. In this particular context, churches in Japan have always been careful to avoid any sign of syncretism, in order to maintain the "authentic" Christian faith.

In this effort, however, the keeping of the traditional authentic Christian faith has been virtually equated with the strict keeping of the Euro-centric understanding of Christianity that has been taught by western elite white male theologians. Any challenge or claim to change this tradition was perceived as a potentially dangerous slide toward heresy or syncretism. Thus, women themselves could not help fearing that their challenge to church traditions might jeopardize their faith.¹¹

Although there are women ministers who have received theological education at seminaries, the education they received was centered on conventional European elite white male theology, and did not offer much help for women's struggles in the church in Japan. Indeed, church women had few tools for developing their theological thinking and for carrying on their challenges to the conventional customs and

⁹ Recently, however, Elisabeth Schüsler Fiorenza's articulation of the difference between the absolute, unchangeable "archetype" and the historical, formative "prototype" has been quite helpful in conceptualizing the Bible and church traditions as prototypes, and in encouraging church people to read the Bible both appreciatively and critically, without fear of heresy. For the concepts of "archetype" and "prototype," as well as the "hermeneutics of suspicion," see Schüsler Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon, 1984), p. 10 and pp. 15-18 respectively.

¹⁰ There are about 625,000 Protestants, 400,000 Catholics, and 35,000 Anglicans in Japan at the end of 2004.

¹¹ Contrary to the notion of a pure and authentic Christian faith, recent biblical studies have found abundant evidence that, throughout their early history, Jewish & Christian traditions were actively syncretistic: Our spiritual ancestors did not hesitate to learn from different spiritual or religious traditions, thus deepening and enriching their understanding of G*d in their own ways. See Satoko Yamaguchi, *Mary & Martha*, pp. 39-44 and the references listed there.

teachings of the church. All of the above made women's struggles in the church very difficult.

II. Feminist Theological Movements in Japan

In the midst of facing these difficulties, more specifically feminist theological thinking and actions grew gradually. One is the women's ordination movements in Anglican and Catholic traditions. As a fruit of this struggle, Anglican women were ordained to ministry for the first time in Japan: one in 1998, two in 1999, and now at the end of 2004, there are 8 women priests of whom more and more women are to follow.

This has not yet occurred in the Catholic tradition, but there are changes in this direction. In 2002, after years of efforts of Catholic sisters to make it possible, Catholic bishops in Japan for the first time invited a woman lecturer to their biblical study at an overnight retreat. I, as a Protestant woman who stands outside of the Catholic ekklesial hierarchy, was chosen to be the lecturer there. So, as the first woman to offer a biblical lecture to bishops, I talked about Mary Magdalene, the first apostle to the apostles, according to our canonical gospels. Although it was just after the decree of the Vatican not to discuss anything about the women's ordination issue, I directly addressed the burning issue, and actually there occurred a lively discussion that night, in which a lot of positive thinking regarding this matter was shared. This, I believe, is a small but firm step forward, for the transformation of the church.¹²

Another movement is the birth of numerous women's own biblical and theological groups that question and challenge patriarchal church systems and teachings in one way or another.¹³ They are still very small groups surfacing here and there and not so widely known. Yet this movement is happening all over Japan, crossing over denominational boundaries among and between Catholics, Anglicans, and Protestants.¹⁴

¹² In 2002, after years of efforts of Catholic sisters to make it possible, Catholic bishops in Japan for the first time invited a woman lecturer to their biblical study at an overnight retreat. I, as a Protestant woman who stands outside of the Catholic ekklesial hierarchy, was chosen to be the lecturer there. So, as the first woman to offer a biblical lecture to bishops, I talked about Mary Magdalene, "the first apostle to the apostles," according to our canonical gospels. This means that, although it was just after the Vatican decree against women's ordination, I directly addressed the burning issue. After the lecture, we had a lively discussion in which a lot of positive thinking was shared. This, I believe, is a small but firm step forward, for the transformation of the church. See also Satoko Yamaguchi, "Mary Magdalene: Woman Who Lived at the Crucial Point of Christian Origins" in *Collaboration between Men and Women in the Church* (Tokyo: Japan Catholic Bishop Association, 2003, in Japanese).

¹³ We use the words "patriarchy" and "patriarchal" to denote a male-centered hierarchical system. This is not a system in which all women are oppressed by all men. We struggle against multiplicative patriarchal oppressions, such as racism, classism, colonialism, sexism (including homophobia), etc, but not just against sexism. Regarding Japanese patriarchal system more specifically, see Hisako Kinukawa, *Women and Jesus in Mark: A Japanese Feminist Perspective* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1994), p.9.

¹⁴ Since we do not have comprehensive documentation of this movement yet, here I can mention only some of the long-lasting and more well known groups among them. I have tried to gather information from different women in a limited time, and the following statement may be corrected or modified more adequately when we build up better documentation in the future. In 1983, "Women and Theology Association" was founded by several women in Tokyo (with the initial call made by Aiko Carter) which had gatherings monthly in Tokyo, but now annually at different places in Japan. In 1988, "The First Joint Conference of Women Theologians in Korea and Japan" (later, "Theological Forum of Korean, Japanese-Residential Korean, and Japanese Women") was held in Seoul (with the initial call made by Aiko Carter and Chung Sook Ja). The Japanese attendants at the first joint conference are mostly those who

There are few women who have received formal or academic theological education, but many of these groups seem to have made a crucial feminist shift in their study stance. That is, instead of starting with questions such as what the Bible and traditions teach or say about women's lives, now women start with various concrete questions derived from their own life experiences, and critically assess traditional teachings on women whether or not they are life-giving for those women who hope to live their lives in fullness as the children of G*d.¹⁵ In this way, they are gradually learning to practice a "hermeneutics of suspicion" towards their own situation. It must be only a few steps forward for them to finally apply the hermeneutics of suspicion to biblical texts themselves, as they gain more and more chances to learn feminist theology through books and lectures.¹⁶

One more feminist theological movement is the increase of women students, formal and auditing, at seminaries. This movement has much potential to support, secure, and increase feminist theology courses, taught by feminist professors and lecturers at seminaries and divinity schools. As more women receive more academic feminist theological education at institutional settings, the chances of ordinary church women

participated the foundation of the above association: Aiko Carter, Iseko Kawase, Yoshiko Isshiki, Hisako Kinukawa, Kuniko Miyazawa, Shoko Hattori, Kiseko Kato, and Satoko Yamaguchi. This joint conference has been held annually in Korea and Japan alternately. In 1988, "Kansai Women and Theology Association" (later, "Christian Women's Center") started (with the initial call made by Akiko Yamashita), and has engendered many small group activities, including their annual conferences. There are many more Protestant women's biblical and theological groups all over Japan, most of which have been ecumenical in their practices. In 1988, some Anglican women gathered together and started "Women's Gathering to Think about the Church" in Tokyo, which was followed immediately in Kyoto and then all over Japan, although they are independent small group activities. In 1991, "Anglican Women's Theological Seminar" started as a program of an Anglican seminar, Central Theological College, in Tokyo (with the initial call made by Shigeeko Yamano, Tazu Sasamori, and Sachiko Kobayashi) which holds study gatherings several times annually and ecumenically. In 1992, "Anglican Women's Forum" started in Tokyo (with the initial call made by Mei Miki, Kimiko Kitagawa, and Umeo Iwai) which has been held at various places in Japan annually. These are the representative biblical and theological gatherings of Anglican women, one of the fruits of which was the first ordination of Anglican women in 1998. Most of the above groups have been publishing their reports annually or otherwise. Among Catholics, sisters have been mostly taking leadership roles of women's Bible study groups since the 1980s, although most of them are nameless small gatherings. Since 2002, All Japan Sisters' Association started focusing on various women's issues at their annual conferences. It is still difficult for them to directly challenge the church patriarchy. However, among 400,000 Catholics in Japan, sisters comprise up to 7000. So, I believe their "sisterhood" will have a great potential to make a break-through in the difficult situation they have been facing. Here I would add one very new women's theological group, "Feminist Theology Circle" which had its first gathering in Tokyo in January, 2005 (with the initial call made by Claudia G. Yamamoto, Alison Gray, and Satoko Yamaguchi), to open up feminist theological discussions among English-speaking women living in Japan, most of whom had been feeling alone without knowing anyone to study and discuss such issues with. This is also an ecumenical gathering and from the outset we have members from Catholic, Anglican, and Protestant backgrounds and from different nationalities.

¹⁵ Instead of writing "God," I write "G*d" which is a coinage of Elisabeth Schüsler Fiorenza to indicate "the inadequacy of our language to speak about the divine." Schüsler Fiorenza, *Rhetoric and Ethic: The Politics of Biblical Studies* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), p. ix.

¹⁶ Here I would like to mention that similar movements and shifts have been occurring among women in other religious/spiritual traditions, such as Buddhism, Shinto, and so-called new religions in Japan. See the articles in JJRS, 2003; Noriko Kawahashi, "Gender and Religion: Gender and Japanese Religions" in *Encyclopedia of Religion* 2nd edition (New York: Thomson/Gale, 2005), pp. 3345-3350.

to participate in feminist biblical studies would be also increase, and hopefully this will create a spiral of aspiring and inspiring feminist theological thinking and practices.¹⁷

III. Introducing the "Center for Feminist Theology & Ministry in Japan"

The "Center for Feminist Theology & Ministry in Japan" was born in Tokyo in 2000, co-founded by Hisako Kinukawa and I myself who have been serving as co-directors. This center is part of the diverse new feminist movements among Christian women in our country, but in some sense it is special. While theology has been perceived as being academic and male, this theological center operates under the leadership of two women, with the supportive collaboration of both women and men, and invites both theologians and ordinary women and men to join in theological studies and discussions together. In addition, this center takes the "dirty" word "feminist" into its name to articulate where it stands from the beginning, when no other theological groups choose the word for themselves. Here I would like to introduce this center's stance and activities as an example of feminist theological movements in Japan.

Our center emphasizes the following three things. First, we develop theologies that respond to a variety of questions arising from life experiences. Second, we maintain a stance that connects theology and ministry. Specifically, we strive to address the issues church women are facing, and to communicate the fruits of theology to the churches, and thus bridge the large gap between theology and ministry in ways that make theological scholarship more responsive to issues in ministry and also more accessible to ordinary church-goers. Third, we foster the perspective that understands discrimination against women as one of multiple oppressions within a patriarchal social structure. We recognize that the human realities of sex/gender are not that of "natural" bipolar oppositions between men and women, but are experienced in many different and changing ways, being inseparably interlocked with issues of ethnicity, culture, class, sexuality (including diverse sexual orientations and preferences), etc. Based on these recognitions, we cultivate a stance that respects diversity, rather than one that deprecates differences among people.

Our basic programs are in four areas. First is the holding of workshops bimonthly. These are open-to-the-public seminars held in Tokyo, and the audience/participants include ordinary women and men, both those within the church and those outside it, as well as those in theological disciplines in Christian and other religious traditions. Second is the publication of the center newsletter, in Japanese and English, to share seminar lectures with those who are unable to attend, and to exchange information among members. Third is the collection of resource materials. We collect books, journals and papers related to feminist theology, and provide them to those who do not have easy access to them. Fourth is networking. We hope to create various feminist networks of communication - national and international, ecumenical and

¹⁷ There are numerous biblical courses taught by women at universities. However, as for expressly feminist theological courses, there seems to be only several courses at a handful of seminaries and divinity schools of different denominational backgrounds, taught by Hisako Kinukawa and myself, both in Tokyo since around 2000/ and by Mei Miki in Kyoto since 2004, to my present knowledge.

interfaith, with those in scholarship as well as in social and political grass-roots movements - and to open channels to support women who want to further their studies in feminist theology. We hope to expand our activities in all fields gradually.

In the following I will offer one of my seminar presentation papers (in a shortened form) that addresses a lively issue among feminist Christians today in Japan: "G*d the Father".

2000 Summer Seminar Theme: Questioning "G*d the Father"

___ "Divine Metaphors in the Biblical Context: The Christian Testament"¹⁸

I would like to begin with a brief explanation of how I approach today's seminar theme in general, and then focus on the Christian

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Testament, the theme assigned to me. Lastly I will present my suggestions regarding today's theme.¹⁹

A. The Initial Question

What should be the adequate appellation for and expressions of "G*d" in today's church as a Christian faith community?

B. Observations Behind the Question

In the church of today's Japan, the metaphor "G*d the Father" is used customarily and exclusively in such a way that it makes us feel that "G*d the Mother" or any other metaphor of female imaging is inadequate or inappropriate. However, all G*d-language is an expression in human language of our relation to G*d in the context of our faith communities. Languages, symbols, metaphors and images not only express but also direct and shape human experiences, thoughts, and understanding. G*d-language used in faith communities has a profound impact on our perception of G*d and on the shaping of our self-identities.

An exclusive, systemic, and customary use of G*d-language that is biased in favor of one gender (male, in our case) distorts the image of G*d who is beyond human genders, and interferes with how we encounter and relate to G*d; and effects the

¹⁸ See more details in Center for Feminist Theology & Ministry in Japan Newsletter #4 (This was published from the center in Japanese in 2000. Although its English version was also published in 2001, the original format is broken there. This article suffers the similar format problem in the version published in JJRS, 2003). See also my article, "Father Image of G*d and Inclusive Language: A Reflection in Japan" in *Towards a New Heaven and a New Earth: Essays in Honor of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza* (Ed., Fernando F. Segovia, Maryknoll: Orbis, 2003), pp. 199-224 (In the endnote #55, I engage in a discussion with a Korean theologian Sun Ai Lee Park, but her name is mistakenly replaced with Kwok Pui-lan somehow in the publication process. I would like the readers make this correction there).

¹⁹ I replace the terms Old Testament and New Testament with Hebrew Bible and Christian Testament. Use of the former reflects a Christian-centric view of the Hebrew Bible.

implication that only male images, not female images, are adequate to express G*d's love and greatness, thus negating the view of human beings that sees both women and men as created in G*d's image. It leads to a sexist understanding of human beings and to a justification of patriarchy.

It is especially problematic to use such one-sided male G*d-language customarily in church services and prayer meetings, which are not places for critical study and examinations but of worship and open-minded encounters with G*d. Such a custom will make young people unconsciously imagine G*d as male from their early days, and will implant patriarchal views and value systems.

Moreover, to continue using the "G*d the Father" metaphor in our contemporary church in this way will be against the basic stance of Israelite faith communities, regarding their G*d-language as seen throughout the Hebrew Bible; and against also the stance of Jesus himself as well as of his reign-of-G*d movement and the earliest Christian communities, regarding their G*d-language, as seen through the Christian Testament.

C. Contexts of G*d-Metaphors in the Bible

1. The Hebrew Bible

In speaking about G*d, the faith communities of Israel acknowledged that G*d is the one who transcends human comprehension, and that no human language can adequately name and express G*d (EX 3: 13-14; 20: 4,7). Based upon this basic recognition, in addressing G*d or referring to G*d, the people of Israel used diverse metaphors and images for G*d lest they should appear to try to contain G*d within the limits of human experiential knowledge and thoughts, thus rendering G*d an idol. For example, the metaphors found in the Hebrew Bible include: creator, spirit, wisdom, winged birds, rock (hill, cave), laboring woman, midwife, mother, compassionate mother (or mother with womb-like compassion), breasts, nurturer, educator, helper, partner, lover, husband, father, deliverer, etc. Note that, among more than 1,000 appearances of the word father in the Hebrew Bible, it is applied to G*d only 15 times.²⁰

Thus, any exclusive, systemic, and customary use of a particular metaphor is an action that goes against the basic stance and wisdom of our spiritual ancestors as seen through the Hebrew Bible. A metaphor, if used in such an exclusive way, will lose its essential metaphoric function (i.e., similarity, dissimilarity, and transcendence), and increase the danger of idolatry.

2. The Christian Testament

In the Christian Testament the "G*d the Father" metaphor is used many times. Regarding this aspect, it is important that we pay particular attention to its historical

²⁰ For the direct address to God, only two times: Isa 63:16; 64:7. See also Hisako Kinukawa, "Rich Image and Metaphors for God as Found in the Hebrew Scripture" in Center for Feminist Theology & Ministry Newsletter 4 (2000 in Japanese; and in 2001 in English, pp.1-8).

context, and examine its usage as well as purpose and meaning in a particular historical situation.

In the following, I will first mention the contentions arising from my inquiries, and then I will present my inquiries and observations in greater detail.

D. Contentions

(1) In praying to and speaking about G*d, the historical Jesus of Nazareth seems to have followed the traditional practices of Jewish faith communities, and used a variety of expressions, metaphors, and images.

(2) It is conceivable that Jesus sometimes addressed G*d by the Aramaic address "Abba" (my father). Such an address, however, was not unique to Jesus, nor was it central in his G*d-language, but one of long-standing Jewish traditions in prayer and song.

(3) In the stories of Jesus in the gospels, Jesus expresses G*d as "Father" in such a way that would undermine patriarchal social structure from the bottom. This attitude is in accordance with Jesus' teaching, life-style, and the way he related to people as testified in his reign-of-G*d movement and in the earliest Christian faith communities.

(4) The earliest Christian communities began to apply the title of "Father" to G*d as an expression of their political and religious resistance, directly challenging Roman imperial worship of that time.

E. Inquiries and Observations

1. Was "G*d the Father" Central in Jesus' G*d-language?

In the Christian Testament, there are many instances of the "G*d the Father" metaphor, which gives the impression that it was central in Jesus' G*d-language. However, on close examination of the biblical texts, it becomes clear that the expression "G*d the Father" was not so often used by Jesus himself or by his reign-of-G*d movement, but that it gained its importance in the earliest Christian communities (after Jesus' death).²¹

The gospels tell us that, in speaking about G*d, Jesus often used in his parables the term *basileia* (feminine noun; meaning "reign-of-G*d") as well as metaphors familiar to both male and female farmers.²² When Jesus talked about G*d, he also used

²¹ The movement Jesus initiated (or the movement of which he was one of the leading figures) is now called the "Jesus movement" or "Jesus' reign-of-God movement." There were various Jewish reign-of-God movements as religious and political resistance movements under the Roman imperial rule around the first century CE (Common Era). Regarding the analysis of the use of "Father" to God in the gospels, see Mary Rose D'Angelo, "Theology in Mark and Q: Abba and 'Father' in Context." *Harvard Theological Review* 85/2 (1992) 149-74. Regarding Johannine gospel's numerous use of "Father" to God, see Satoko Yamaguchi, *Mary & Martha*, p.54.

²² Such as sowing, growing seeds, mustard seeds, bread-making, jewel in the field, pearl, etc. (Mk 4:1-9, 26-32; Mt 13:1-9, 30-32, 44-45; Lk8:4-8; 13:18-19 etc).

female images.²³ Furthermore, he used expressions that would evoke the G*d of Israel in the female figure of Wisdom (Sophia) who promises rest and shalom (peace) to all the heavily laden, who invites everyone in the streets to her abundant table, and who bestows Her life-giving wisdom to Her people. In fact, the gospels describe Jesus as a prophet of Sophia, or even as the incarnation of the Sophia-G*d of Israel, using female imagery.²⁴

Theologians who adhere to the metaphor "G*d the Father" have emphasized that it was unique to Jesus to address G*d as "Abba" (my father). However, it is now known that such an address to G*d already existed in the Jewish traditions of prayer and psalms, especially in pious prayers seeking G*d's protection and help in the midst of persecutions or seeking G*d's forgiveness for sin. Addressing G*d as "Abba" was not special or unique to Jesus, nor was it an indication of Jesus' special closeness to G*d (Once it was argued that "Abba" was equivalent to "Daddy," an intimate address to one's father, but such an argument has been refuted by later studies).²⁵

The gospels tell us that the last cry of Jesus on the cross was "My G*d, my G*d, why have you forsaken me?" (Mk. 15: 34; Mt. 27: 46). This seems to be part of an Israelite communal prayer "My G*d, my G*d, why have you forsaken me? ... " (eg. Ps. 22). One of the important metaphors in this prayer is that of midwife. In ancient times, a midwife also fulfilled the role of home doctor who provided health-care not only for mothers and newborns but also for infants and children.²⁶ So one of the images of a midwife was a reliable helper in times of illness and weakness, someone who had known the person since birth or even before.

That Jesus' last cry, according to the gospels, evoked, among others, the image of G*d as midwife is interesting. It tells us that such a female image was also a significant one in Jesus' G*d-language. Therefore, it would be more appropriate to accept the tradition of the so-called "Lord's prayer" as one of many teachings by Jesus, only some of which the gospels handed on to us.

2. Religious and Political Resistance in the Prayer "Our Father in Heaven"

It is often more important to understand the intention of Jesus' teaching, rather than to follow it slavishly. Jesus rejected the legalism which makes people obey the Law only literally. He taught his disciples to understand and observe the primary life-giving intention of the Law in their own contexts (eg. the Sabbath Law). It is therefore important for us to pay attention to the original intention of Jesus' teaching, in his historical context, when considering the words he used to address G*d.

²³ Such as a hen who gathers and protects her chicks under her wings and a woman who tirelessly searches for her lost coin (Mk 23: 37; Lk 15: 8-10)

²⁴ Mk 11: 28-30; 23: 37; Lk 7: 35; 13: 34; 14: 13-24; 15: 2, 8-10; Jn 1: 1-18 etc. Regarding Jesus as a prophet of Sophia, see Elaine M. Wainwright, "Jesus Sophia: An Image Obscured in the Johannine Prologue" in *The Bible Today* 36/2 (1998) 92-97; Yamaguchi, *Mary and Martha*, pp. 60-65.

²⁵ See Mary Rose D'Angelo, "Abba and 'Father': Imperial Theology and the Jesus Traditions." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 11/4 (1992) 611-30, and the reference there.

²⁶ Tal Ilan, *Jewish Women in Greco-Roman Palestine*. Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publications, 1995, p. 189.

Now, when Jesus taught his followers to pray to G*d, saying "Our Father in heaven," what kind of meaning did the expression "father in heaven" have for people in the first century Greco-Roman world? One thing we want to pay attention to here is Roman Imperial worship at the time.

In the first-century Roman Empire, Jupiter/Zeus was worshipped as "Father in heaven," and each of the Roman Emperors was deified and worshipped as the "Father," the divine agent on earth. We need to keep this historical context in mind as we hear the expression "G*d the Father" in the Christian Testament. For those Jews who were colonized under Roman rule, to pray to the G*d of Israel as the only "Father in heaven," and not to call anyone on earth "Father," directly challenged Rome's Imperial control and Emperor worship. It was a daring statement of political and religious resistance (Mt. 6:9-10 // Lk. 1:2; Mt. 23:9, 11).

Such a practice of resistance, as well as their open table communion (eating-together) with those who were despised by society, built up a community that included everybody equally as children of G*d, and thus undermined the Roman patriarchal social structure from the bottom. Both the execution of Jesus and the succeeding fierce persecution of Christians by the Roman political power illustrate the cost they had to pay for such practices and life-style under Roman Imperial domination.

Thus we see that the G*d-language of –"G*d the Father," in the particular historical context of the Jesus' movement and the earliest Christian communities, was a faith expression of their communal practices and life-style which resisted patriarchal relationships and the social structures of domination-submission. In this way they challenged the oppressive Roman power, and set forth egalitarian and inclusive human relationships and society. Therefore, when we pray in our own particular historical context, it is important to choose words and practices that will articulate and nurture such a faith of resistance and hope.

Unfortunately, however, the church in its succeeding history used the word Father in a way that utterly betrays Jesus' teaching in the gospels. That is, the church called earthly clergies "Father" and transformed the church structure itself into a patriarchal institution. In the course of this history of the church, the rich variety of G*d-languages and metaphors were lost. The "G*d the Father" metaphor became not only central but exclusive to the G*d-language of the church. Thus, the expression lost its impact to subvert patriarchal structures in the church as well as in society, but rather became a tool to maintain and reinforce them. By customarily addressing G*d by the expression "G*d the Father" in the church, we may have lost and distorted significant aspects of G*d with which we should have otherwise been blessed in our communal Christian understanding of G*d.

F. New Questions

Based upon the above observations, I would like to pose some new questions. In today's context, what kind of actions would help to recover the things that have been damaged, distorted, or lost in the long history of exclusive use of the G*d-language, "G*d the Father"? What kind of actions would be necessary to challenge and transform patriarchal relationships, values, and structures in both church and society?"

G. More Thoughts and Suggestions

(1) Changing our words and expressions is essential to changing our consciousness and social structures. It is true that the social reality does not change by a "mere" change of the words we use. Nevertheless, it is a first step toward such change. Introduction of new words, symbols, metaphors; images, etc. makes people become conscious of things they have become used to unconsciously, and brings about surprises and new questions. In this way, we will see our daily routine in a new light, and act with new consciousness. Such small changes in our daily lives form the matrix of much broader cultural and social changes. Our conscious choice and use of words and expressions in our faith communities are an essential issue of faith. How might our encounters with G*d be enriched by this?

(2) The "G*d the Father" language praised our G*d as the "Almighty," "King of Kings," "Lord of Lords," and thus reinforces our values of patriarchy, imperialism, victorism, and expansionism, our life-style of power-oriented militarism and passive escapism, as well as our practices of colonial domination and ensuing ecological destruction. This language cannot responsibly answer the issues of our reality, such as mass-scale starvation, genocide and war, and the suffering of the powerless and the innocent, all of which have been endlessly repeated in our history.²⁷ However, as we turn our eyes to biblical traditions, we encounter the G*d who created the whole cosmos, bestowed dignity and freedom to humans, brought people out of the house of slavery, and led them to form communities based upon relationships not of domination and submission but of autonomy and mutual responsibility.

(3) The relationships G*d held with humans illustrates one who is not a G*d of absolute power-control but of continuous love and care regardless of the repeated misconduct of humans. This G*d abides with the least among humans, bears heavy loads with them, becomes indignant toward the unjust, brings comfort and hope to those in despair and those who struggle, and encounters people as the life-giving, life-sustaining, living G*d. In order to articulate and transmit such rich aspects of the reality of G*d and of our relationships with G*d in our faith communities, it is important to use diverse expressions, both old and new, responding to our particular historical contexts.

²⁷ For a suggestion for changing these divine images in making new hymns, see Brian Wren, *What Language Shall I Borrow?: God-Talk in Worship: A Male Response to Feminist Theology*. New York: Crossroad, 1991. See also for such new hymns, Miriam Therese Winter. *The Singer and the Song: An Autobiography of the Spirit*. Maryknoll: Orbis, 1999.

(4) I do not intend to say that "G*d the Father" metaphor is itself the problem. What I want to point out is that it is necessary to use a "Mother" metaphor intentionally in today's context, in order to undo the bias generated by the long term exclusive, systemic, and customary use of the "G*d the Father" metaphor. It is necessary if we are to restore a more adequate balance for our right speaking of G*d. It will also be helpful to use expressions, such as "Mother-father G*d" in order to constantly remind ourselves of G*d's transcendence of human sexes/genders.

(5) At the same time, it will be also important to use diverse metaphors together lest we should fall into idolatry or contain G*d's image into a fixed form: by inadequate human languages. At least for the time being, it will be especially important to introduce a variety of metaphors that enable us to imagine G*d in female images. In using many different metaphors, we should be mindful to use them in ways that will not enforce gender stereotypes regarding "motherhood," "fatherhood," "femininity," "masculinity," etc., but will emancipate women and men from conventional stereotypes.

H. Conclusion

Based upon all of the above observations and thoughts, I conclude that the use of diverse metaphors is justified and encouraged as an important communal task for the following reasons:

(1) It is a practice passed down from our ancestral faith communities, from the time of the Hebrew Bible, in their basic stance toward G*d-language.

(2) It is also a practice which learns from Jesus himself, Jesus' reign-of-G*d movement, and the earliest Christian communities, from their daring religious and political challenges in their particular historical context.

(3) It will engender new attitudes toward justice and the well-being of all the children of G*d, in our own historical context.

Aus: Hg. CHUNG Meehyun, *Breaking Silence – Theology from Asian Women*, EATWOT 2006, S. 41-61.