

The Holy Spirit and gender equality

A Latin American perspective

Patricia Urueña Barbosa

To see the Holy Spirit from the perspective of churches that work for peace and justice is to understand the liberating, empowering, and transformative dynamic of the work of God's Spirit among us.

Before looking at whether conditions and practices of justice exist in our societies, we must ask ourselves how justice is practiced in our congregations so that we are led to live in peace. What we find in the world is people with power who dominate the world economy; colonize other peoples; exploit resources; and use social, economic, and political structures for their personal ends. And we must ask, how are these relationships of domination also present in our churches? We cannot say that we are churches

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working for peace and justice when our theological beliefs lead us to practice relationships of domination and exclusion. Specifically, we need to examine the discrimination that women suffer in the church: some of our congregations exclude women from decision making and from ministries we reserve only for men. Some Christian churches exclude women from ordination as pastors.

We need to question and revise the patriarchal theological beliefs that have led to the oppression and marginalization of women in the church as well as in society. We must revise concepts and practices such as those that consider men superior and women inferior, and that make women responsible for the fall of humanity, for sin, and for the presence of evil in the world. Patriarchal societies' views about male superiority and female inferiority have resulted not just in asymmetric relationships between women and

men but also in unjust and powerful economic structures in the world. These views have generated evils such as xenophobia, racism, domination, colonization, wars, exploitation of natural resources, destruction of the environment, and death.

In the struggle to overcome these evils the patriarchal or *machista* system has perpetrated against women—but also against other men, oppressed peoples, and creation itself—we need theological renewal. We need a theology that will help us establish and support relationships of justice and peace among individuals and groups of people, with God, and in our care for creation. In particular, we need to reconsider our beliefs about the presence and action of the Spirit of God in the world.

The Holy Spirit as theology's neglected stepsister

Since biblical times God's people have attempted to understand the role of the Spirit of God in the world. In the first centuries of the church's existence, councils articulated developing Trinitarian understandings of God, which gave attention to the role of the Spirit. The doctrine of the Trinity is not spelled out in scripture; it is a dogma, a creedal formulation. What we do find in the Bible is the important and active function of God as creator, sustainer, liberator and savior; of the Son as redeemer of humanity and creation; and of the Spirit present before the creation of the world, and accompanying the people to legislate, to create order, and to comfort.

Theologians have devoted a lot of attention to the creating, liberating, providing, and saving role of God, and to the nature and work of Jesus Christ. But theological work on the role of the Holy Spirit has been minimal. The Spirit has been forgotten and marginalized by theologies, both traditional and contemporary. Pneumatology, the theology of the Spirit, has been the neglected stepsister of Christian theology. Like Cinderella's potential at the beginning of the old fairy tale, the Spirit's attributes have gone largely unrecognized, lost in obscurity.

Women in Latin America as human Cinderellas

Many societies have abused, exploited, and marginalized women not only in Latin America but in much of the world throughout much of human history. Like Cinderella, many women have been

oppressed and mistreated, and their gifts and worth have gone unrecognized.

In countries shaped by some forms of traditional Christian theology, women have been held responsible for the fall of humanity and for the sin and evil that exist in the world. Women have been considered the gateway through which the devil came into the world, and have been seen as tempters and heretics, inclined to do evil. For these reasons, women have been regarded as unworthy to represent divinity and therefore ineligible to serve as priests for God's people.

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Theology that has been framed in the context of patriarchal society has not used feminine language and images to talk of God's action. Its categories are reinforced by masculine language and images for God (God as Father). It does not use the language or imagery of God as mother, and it disregards those scripture texts that reflect the maternal action of God (God as procreator and caregiver; God as compassionate, faithful, nurturing, and comforting; see Num. 11:12; Deut. 32:11–12,18; Isa. 46:3; 49:15; and 66:13).

Many women continue to live in patriarchal contexts of marked social injustice and religious exclusion. Even in denominations that ordain them, women are not always granted an authority that would enable their full participation in church leadership, on a par with men who lead. Women in patriarchal societies tend to be second-class citizens, with few opportunities to study or do work that pays well. These constraints limit their possibilities for self-improvement and independence. The political contributions of women in such societies are undervalued. A setting in which these attitudes prevail becomes a breeding ground for male domination of women, for violence and abuse that women suffer at the hands of men. These multiple forms of marginalization and death are the experience not only of Latin American women but of women throughout the world where structures of domination and exclusion continue to determine their lives.

The Holy Spirit, neglected stepsister, and human Cinderellas

The above analysis suggests that the Spirit is theology's neglected stepsister, a divine Cinderella who has yet to emerge from obscurity. Similarly, women are the human Cinderellas of patriarchal societies, including the society of the church. We turn now to explore the symbolic relationship between the oblivion that the Spirit has fallen into in theological study, and the marginalization and neglect that women suffer in the church and in Latin American society.

If we reinterpret the Spirit's presence and action from a liberating perspective, seeing her as the Spirit of a God who does not marginalize, oppress, or exercise control over or use violence against, then women—and men—can begin to overcome male chauvinism with all the evils it has caused, and instead find fulfillment in a life of justice and peace. At the same time, more equal social structures can emerge, which can help reduce violence, colonialism, domination, and race and gender exclusion. In this way women and men will become more aware of the value and respect that women, life, and creation itself deserve. Together, liberated women and men will be better equipped to face the challenges to do justice, live peaceably, and care for creation.

A theology of the Spirit that overcomes dualisms of gender

I want to focus not on theological and historical disputes about the *nature* or *essence* of God as Spirit and will concentrate instead on understanding the *activity* of God-Spirit in the world. Our purpose in this theological reconstruction is not to replace an unjust system of masculine domination with one of feminine domination, which would only perpetuate the domination system in another form.

Our proposal is to understand and name a God whose concern is justice. Our aim is to overcome the dualisms of gender that perpetuate injustice. This theological reconstruction we are undertaking is intended not to find a masculine God with some feminine characteristics but to discover a God in whose image we—women and men—were created, a God with whom all human beings can identify, knowing that God understands us, brings us comfort, and is our strength and hope in this world of injustice, pain, and death.

The Spirit, God's Wisdom. The scriptures provide significant resources for thinking about the action of the Spirit of God. Particular passages about the presence and power of the Spirit are found in the canonical books of the Bible as well as in the Old Testament apocryphal and pseudepigraphical texts, especially in wisdom literature: Proverbs 1–9 (4–3 BCE), Ben Sirach or Sirach (2 BCE), and the Book of the Wisdom of Solomon (1 BCE). In this sapiential literature Hebrew terms related to the Spirit of God are grammatically feminine: *shekinah* (“the presence of God”), *ruah* (“spirit”; the Greek equivalent is *pneuma*, which is neuter), and *hokmah* (“wisdom”; *sophia* in Greek, also feminine).

All these words provide feminine images of the Spirit of God. *Hokmah* is used to talk about the mystery of God in feminine

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symbols. The biblical figure of *hokmah* or Wisdom is the personification of the presence and activity of God in the Old Testament. *Ruah* points to the presence of the divine Spirit, and refers to the creative and liberating power of God in the world, with marked feminine connotations. The female term *shekinah* is associated with the Spirit of God; it indicates the permanence of God's presence among the people of Israel. The *shekinah* expands the biblical understanding of the Spirit of God as feminine.

In translations of the Bible, and perhaps because of an androcentric and patriarchal mentality, *ruah* (spirit) was translated into Latin as *spiritus* (male). *Hokmah* (*sophia*, Wisdom) was translated into Greek as *logos* (male). As a result, any identification of the Holy Spirit with the feminine in God was lost.

Spirit-Wisdom, giver of life. The Spirit-Wisdom dwelt with God before the creation (Prov. 8:22), was the beginning of the creation (Rev. 3:14), was present in the creative action and generating of life (Gen. 1: 2; 26; Prov. 8:27–29), and was ordering all (Prov. 8:30) as an act of lawmaking, to judge the world. In Sirach 24:1–31 the Spirit-Wisdom describes herself and recounts her origins and her work: she came out of the mouth of the Almighty; God created her from the beginning, before the ages; in

the holy tent she ministered with her presence, then was established in Zion; her power was in Jerusalem; she and the law are identical (Sirach 24:1–31; JB).

As creator and giver of life the Spirit-Wisdom sustains creation and hopes her sons and daughters will also care for creation. From this ecological perspective, people are called to be involved along with God in the care, preservation, and salvation of all creation. We have solidarity with and responsibility for taking care of the biosphere to sustain life.

Spirit-Wisdom, the maternal face of God. Some biblical metaphors offer us a broad view of God's compassionate and maternal power. In Isaiah 42:14, God screams with terrible pain to give birth to the new creation. In Isaiah 46:3–4, God carries people in her womb and will bear them until old age. These verses imply a nurturing role: God teaches God's people to take their first steps, carries them from here to there, accompanies them from birth into old age. God is a consoling mother in Isaiah 66:13 and Hosea 11:3–4; in Isaiah 49:15, unlike some human mothers, God as mother will never forget the children of her womb.

The Spirit or God's Wisdom in the Jewish tradition has a marked maternal face, and is strongly linked with the biological function of maternity (the feminine). The Spirit-Wisdom

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is also linked to law, government, and justice, which in the androcentric mentality are male roles. The view of Spirit in this wisdom literature integrates male and female traits; in the Spirit-Wisdom, patriarchy's male and female stereotypes are overcome.

Spirit-Wisdom, proclaimer of justice.

Proverbs 1:20–21; 3:19; and chapters 8 and 9 recognize the presence and action of God through the Spirit, as a cosmic figure who administers justice, is the embodiment of God, and is God. In these texts, Wisdom invites people to follow her ways of life, truth, and justice. Wisdom raises her voice, preaches, and manifests herself in the middle of the public life. She is seen in the streets, in the plazas where people engage in trade and economic activity. She is at the gates of the cities where

justice and mercy are imparted. She sends her maids (prophets, apostles, and wise people) to invite those who are in the streets—the excluded, marginalized and dehumanized—to eat at the festive table. She leads humanity to great things, inspiring and bringing wisdom. Through her guidance, people find life. They follow the ways of truth, walking by paths of justice, knowing God.

This call of the Spirit-Wisdom is an inclusive call. It sets out an alternative proposal not only for women but for all humanity. It seeks to establish justice in the world and to cultivate equitable relationships in personal, ecclesiastic, economic, politic, cultural, and social spheres, and with creation. When we embrace it we leave behind the image of the patriarchal God who manipulates

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and exterminates life through power that knows no bounds; that creates hierarchies; and that excludes, oppresses, and exploits nature.

Daughters of the Spirit-Wisdom

The patriarchal image of God the Father has been exclusive and oppressive, and it has justified violence against women. This understanding of God has also led humanity to violence, war, and the destruction of nature. The maternal image of God is not the only helpful view of the divine, but it is a more holistic view and provides a framework for

the elaboration of an ecological theology that promotes the protection of life in all its forms.

Reinterpreting the presence and action of the Spirit-Wisdom gives us resources for overcoming the marginalization, abuse, and oppression of human Cinderellas, and for opening possibilities for women to experience the fullness of life. Many have said that women want the power to dominate, but our goal is not to exercise the power that dominates. The power that we as women want is power to be respected; to stop violence against us at the hands of men; to gain access to resources and assets; to live in freedom; and to experience a world free from domination, destruction, and violence.

Through this reinterpretation of the Spirit, marginalized women strengthen their self-image, a self-image now based on their identity as daughters of the Spirit-Wisdom. They grow in their understanding of themselves as created in God's image, and they find a space of identification with God. The Spirit-Wisdom forges a consciousness of the freedom and equality with which God endowed women and men. Men and women, both bearing the image of God, will then cultivate equitable gender relations. Women, together with men, will accept the call of the Wisdom in Proverbs 8 and 9 to follow her ways of justice, and they will come to her table to acquire instruction and wisdom, to seek justice, and to overcome inequalities by confronting unjust systems. They will seek

transformation and work to make the necessary changes in church and in society.

Finally, the Spirit-Wisdom is a symbol of hope because she encourages the formation of inclusive communities of peers, women and men, who foster just societies, without discrimination, xenophobia, or racism; communities that manage resources responsibly and without hoarding, celebrating what God has given to all humanity for the sustenance of life. The search for peace and the practice of justice should lead us to build communities of faith and societies that dignify and humanize, with relationships of fairness and equality between women and men, at the same time ensuring human care for the earth.

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