

What sort of God? Finding the Feminine in the Project Violet Research

Even though I had been engaged with Project Violet for some time, I found visiting the exhibition space at the 2024 Baptist Assembly unexpectedly emotional. Prompted by Jane Day, this led to deeper theological reflection. The experience coincided with preaching on the Holy Spirit and some personal reflection regarding the gender of the third person of the Trinity. I began to wonder what sort of God had led and guided Project Violet. Could it be that the processes and outcomes of an all-female research project into the experiences of women particularly reflect the feminine nature of God?

This paper will briefly explore the work of feminist theologian Elizabeth Johnson and her understanding of the Holy Spirit as female before reflecting on how this femininity may be reflected in the Project Violet research. It will particularly focus on how the Holy Spirit's work revealed in scripture as creative, collaborative and comforting can be seen in the Project Violet research.

The Catholic theologian, Elizabeth Johnson in her 1992 work 'She Who Is' argues for an understanding of the God as feminine (as well as masculine) and the use of female pronouns when speaking of the third person of the Trinity.¹ Such ideas were not new. Murray demonstrates how images and ideas of the Holy Spirit as mother can be found in the Early Church. He argues that these ideas were then superseded by developing doctrines relating to Mary and the Church which shifted ideas of the divine feminine onto them.² Some decades earlier, Williams had explored the idea of a space within Judeo-Christian theology for God as female. This was in response to the women's liberation movement and questions arising in different denominations about the ordination of women. His concern was that the masculinity of Jesus as priest was a barrier to the concept of female priesthood.³

Since then, the assignment of gender and use of pronouns has become more highly politicised, perhaps distracting and discouraging us from asking genuine questions about why God is so often spoken about and portrayed as solely male or genderless when we are taught that both women and men are made in God's image. As Johnson argues, how we speak of God is important as it represents how we think about God which in turn informs our practice.⁴

Johnson argues against the idea that God is male with 'feminine qualities' or that the Holy Spirit is the feminine dimension of God preferring to argue that God transcends gender in a more mysterious way than our human experience of gender allows. There are undoubted weaknesses with just ascribing what might be seen as feminine traits to aspects of God's character but not entertaining the idea that God could perhaps be female in some way. However, speaking of God as female is not clearly portrayed in scripture albeit there are metaphors and actions ascribed to Father God which can be read as maternal. There is also a legitimate question as to what traits are feminine as well as the risk that any such attributes are subordinated to others deemed masculine.

There is a stronger biblical argument for the Holy Spirit being the person of the Trinity in whom we see the most actions and characteristics which relate to female lived experience.⁵ These include being a midwife, washerwoman and crafter.⁶ The Holy Spirit is described as a hovering bird in Deuteronomy

¹ Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who is*, 3rd edn (Crossroad Publishing, Spring Valley, NY: 2017), pp. 58, 140.

² Robert Murray, Robert, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom*, 2nd edn (T & T Clark, London: 2006), pp. 329, 336.

³ Jay G. Williams, 'Yahweh, Women and the Trinity', *Theology*, 32 (1975), 234-240 <<https://web.p.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=3&sid=0ba27448-cfc4-4e2e-a688-a2d31016ad52%40redis>> [Accessed 10 December 2024], p.234.

⁴ Johnson, p.3.

⁵ Johnson, p.86.

⁶ Johnson, p.87.

32:11, which is often taken as mothering imagery, although both male and female eagles protect their young.⁷ There is also the role of the Holy Spirit in the conception and birth of Jesus and Jerome and Origen's identification of the Holy Spirit as mother at Jesus' baptism.⁸ Finally, there is the textual evidence of the gender of word *ruach* in Hebrew being feminine. To speak of and imagine God, as exclusively male erases this biblical witness and robs us of seeing ourselves clearly as women made in God's image.

Three key actions of the Holy Spirit which can be seen in scripture and which it can be argued relate to the feminine or to female lived experience are that of creator, collaborator and comforter. All three are seen clearly in the Project Violet research.

The Holy Spirit as Creator is revealed in the first words of scripture in Genesis 1:1, continues with the breathing of life into human beings in Genesis 2:7 and finds new expression with Bezalel and Oholiab being the first people noted as being filled with the Spirit so that they could create the tabernacle and objects required for worship.⁹ Creativity is not a gendered activity, but women in their lived experience are often those who create in crafts, place-making and the bearing of life and these aspects are all seen as actions of the Holy Spirit in the bible passages above.

Hamilton argues that the Holy Spirit not only inspired Bezalel and Oholiab's creativity but gave them wisdom as to how to apply it.¹⁰ Here there is a strong correlation with the research presented as part of Project Violet. The exhibition itself used the creative arts in presenting the research papers visually through illustrated panels as well as the artistic display of the box of submissions of women's experiences, sealed and held in Angus Library in Oxford. Many of the research papers themselves were highly creative either in their presentation or their research methods. Clare Hooper used Lego Serious Play as a means of women in SCBA exploring and sharing what they thought affirming women leaders in their association looked like. Alexandra Elish and Carmel Murphy Elliot commissioned Dawn Savidge to represent their findings through a triptych powerfully conveying women's experiences in pioneer ministry. Others utilised creative means to overcome communication barriers and have their voices heard in the research, namely Hayley Young and Susan Myatt. Such creativity is the work of the Holy Spirit, as in and through the leaders, researchers and contributors to Project Violet she inspired, enabled, gave wisdom and enhanced their skills.

Jesus teaches much about the action of the Holy Spirit in his farewell discourses in John 14-17. Amongst the many actions of the Holy Spirit taught in this passage, in expressing how the Holy Spirit is sent by the Father and Son who in turn was sent by the Father, we see the collaboration of the Trinity in working to make God's love known and reconcile humanity to God.¹¹ As with creativity, being collaborative is not a gendered action. However, it is sometimes noted that women tend to prefer collaboration in leadership and working together with others to achieve a goal.

⁷ Christopher J.H Wright, *Knowing God Through the Old Testament* (IVP Academic, Downers Grove, IL: 2019), p. 414; The Center for Conservation Biology Facts about Eagles <https://ccbbirds.org/what-we-do/research/species-of-concern/virginia-eagles/facts-about-eagles/#:~:text=A:%20Male%20and%20female%20eagles,for%20territory%20and%20nest%20defen se.> [Accessed 28 November 2024]

⁸ Johnson, p. 51; Murray, p. 331.

⁹ Ex. 31:1-11.

¹⁰ Victor P. Hamilton, *Exodus: An Exegetical Commentary* (Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, MI: 2012), p.522.

¹¹ John 14:26

Carson notes that in describing the action of the Holy Spirit in John 14:16-21; 23-27, 'distinctions [between the persons of the Trinity] are simultaneously maintained and blurred'.¹² This can be seen in the work of Project Violet which contains many collaborations where although the contributors are named and acknowledged, the specific work of each person is obscured as the outcome of the work produced together is of greater importance. The Project itself was co-led and a team of theological reflectors were chosen rather than one person. In addition, amongst the research papers themselves Alexandra Elish and Carmen Murphy Elliott worked together. The structure of the project itself sought to be multi-voiced and express as much diversity as possible. Such collaboration, valuing the outcome rather than seeking personal recognition and recognising that working together can often have a greater impact than working alone reflects the actions of the Holy Spirit, as she models such working in the Godhead itself.

Another primary motif of the Holy Spirit's work is that of the comforter. This is one interpretation of the word 'paraclete' used to describe the Holy Spirit in John's Gospel. Literally, it means 'one who is called alongside' although extra biblically it is often used in a legal context as an advocate.¹³ The association with the word comfort comes from its translation in the King James Version and perhaps is best understood from its Latin root of *confortare*, to bring strength.¹⁴

The action of the Holy Spirit in bringing comfort is perhaps the most contentious in terms of a gendered activity. Female lived experience often includes the giving of comfort in the contexts of personal relationships such as wife, mother or friend, in work often associated with women such as nursing and even in the church with women involved in pastoral work. However, such roles and actions have also been historically seen as subordinate to male actions of providing, protecting or leading.

In the context of Project Violet, it is more helpful to see the action of the Holy Spirit as paraclete in giving strength, coming alongside and even advocating for the voice of women in ministry to be heard. The very existence of the project, its outcomes and calls to actions have all been called forth by the Holy Spirit as she has sought to continue her ongoing work of guiding us into all truth.¹⁵ Her work has brought comfort in the traditional and translated sense to many women ministers who have seen their truth amplified; but perhaps brought conviction to others. The work of convicting the world of sin is also hers as described in John 16:8.

Project Violet is the work of women acting together in creative ways. It has displayed and celebrated the work and experience of women in Baptist Ministry and brought comfort and conviction. In the ways that this has been done and in the outcomes it has produced, the actions of the Holy Spirit as creator, collaborator, comforter, advocate and the one who convicts are reflected. If we choose to dare to name the Holy Spirit as female, grappling with the reality that God must contain within themselves the image of womankind and risk allowing our understanding of God to be broadened and enriched; we can speak of how she has been at work. Project Violet is not just female theological research, but its processes and outcomes reflect the nature and action of the Holy Spirit, who we can name, if we chose, as feminine. In doing so, we find the feminine in Project Violet. This idea reinforces the value of women engaging in theological research as in doing so they uniquely reveal something of the nature and action of God in the world.

¹² D.A. Carson, *Farewell Discourse and Final Prayer of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1980), Chapter 3 [Read on Perlego].

¹³ Burge, Gary M., *John*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2000), p. 389.

¹⁴ Burge, p. 389.

¹⁵ John 16:13.

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