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Motherhood and Love: Beyond the Gendered Stereotypes of Theology

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Cristina Grenholm and Marie Tåqvist, *Motherhood and Love: Beyond the Gendered Stereotypes of Theology*

Motherhood and Love: Beyond the Gendered Stereotypes of Theology by Grenholm, Cristina; Marie Tåqvist

Review by: Sandra Sullivan-Dunbar

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modern than they are biblical or Qur'anic. Yet it could well be the case that some believers in each tradition could have such skewed images of the creator, so the author proposes that believers "can learn more about their own idea of God and how they image or imagine God by reflecting on both the similarities and differences in the image among the three faiths" (129).

That refrain becomes the parting recommendation of this careful delineation of each of the Abrahamic faiths with regard to naming God. Yet the authentic fruit of the comparative theological approach that the author recommends can hardly be limited to such propaedeutic remarks, though it could well arise from comparisons as detailed and probing as the individual accounts of naming in each faith. Perhaps such reflection is meant to emerge from students working with this study, but it would stand a better chance of doing so were the comparative examples more substantial than those given. Moreover, such examples could well have been gleaned from current studies, which might have suggested a mode of exploration more attuned to learning from other faiths in this substantive way.

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GRENHOLM, CRISTINA. *Motherhood and Love: Beyond the Gendered Stereotypes of Theology*. Translated by MARIE TÅQVIST. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2011. xx+204 pp. \$25.00 (paper).

In her most recent book, the Swedish theologian Cristina Grenholm intends both to develop an understanding of motherhood that "does not presuppose or bring about the subordination of women" (15) and to use that conception of motherhood to provide new insights into Christian and non-Christian reflections on love. In particular, she examines the doctrine of Mary as virgin mother and the biblical accounts of the Annunciation, critiquing the former and reinterpreting the latter in order to develop her own conception of love.

Grenholm's approach is hermeneutical; she begins with the assertions that "all life is interpreted" and that Christianity is a "worldview," or an interpretation of "life" (ix). She offers a plethora of definitional terms: "Christian templates" are "short, authorized formulations of doctrine," such as "God is triune" (71). These doctrines can be a starting point for the hermeneutical process, a preunderstanding from which critical reflection can begin and richer theological meaning can be unpacked. Conversely, such doctrines can become "petrified dogmas," as in the case of the doctrine of the virgin mother, Mary (71). In a similar process, gender stereotypes reflect a petrification of gender meanings that are assigned to the biological reality of sex through a "genderization process" (24).

Grenholm thus proposes parallel processes of critical reflection. We should reflect on doctrine by placing it into dialogue with "life" and with "critical theology," which "raises questions related to life or doctrine" (77). Critical theology can raise questions, for example, about the relation between Mary's status as virgin mother and Mary's own humanity, addressed through an account of the lived experience of motherhood. Critical gender theory can investigate the "empirical relationships" between biological sex and gender construction, particularly as they are expressed in understandings of motherhood (80). These two parallel hermeneutical processes must be accompanied by yet a third: "scriptural criticism," which incorporates reflection on biblical texts, doctrine, and "context." By "context," Grenholm appears to mean the particular questions brought by the interpreter to text and doctrine, but this is not made explicit. It is also not clear how we are to differentiate between a "Christian template" and a "petrified dogma."

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With respect to the project at hand, Grenholm explores her category of “life” through a “realistic” account of the lived experience of motherhood. In conversation with theologians and philosophers of motherhood such as Sara Ruddick, Paula Cooley, and the Swedish philosopher Ulla Holm, Grenholm points to the “ambiguity” of motherhood, contesting romanticized ideals of the mother. Mothers cannot be perfect. The image and doctrine of the virgin motherhood of Mary places regular mothers in a bind, as they cannot simultaneously be virgins and mothers.

Grenholm then reflects on biblical accounts of Mary, focusing in particular on Mary’s pregnancy as an experience of vulnerability. Grenholm differentiates between vulnerability as that which is “enveloped in love” and “exposure,” or exploited vulnerability (121). She then defines love as “the good presence of someone in vulnerability; it prevents vulnerability from becoming exposure, and it constitutes a defense against oppression” (121). The story of the Annunciation thus becomes an example of divine love that supports and protects the vulnerable—here, the pregnant woman.

In like manner, Grenholm differentiates between “hierarchy,” which she consistently describes as patriarchal and bad, and “asymmetry,” or inequalities that do not involve exploitation. Hierarchy involves “power,” a term that Grenholm consistently uses with a negative valence. Beyond this, Grenholm offers no criteria to distinguish asymmetrical relations from hierarchical ones. More nuance is certainly called for here, although Grenholm’s focus on the possibility of “good” inequality, or asymmetry, is important in light of the tendency of some contemporary thinkers to push too insistently for equality in every relationship (she treats Carter Heyward and Rita Nakashima Brock) or, conversely, to pattern ideal human relations on an utterly asymmetrical view of the God-human relationship (she discusses Anders Nygren).

Grenholm considers her proposal a new alternative to existing conceptions of Christian love, painting these with a rather broad brush: “In theology . . . love is conceived of as compatible with hierarchy. . . . Love is closely connected with power, and power is rarely problematized” (122). However, neither this description nor her book more generally adequately engages the rich Christian tradition of *caritas* theologies, of love as a desire for and a response to good as in Augustine and Aquinas, or of love as unconditional and joyful service of the needy neighbor, rooted in gratitude for grace, as in Luther or Kierkegaard. Grenholm could surely have fruitfully engaged Aquinas’s account of charity as friendship with God, a friendship that nevertheless involves asymmetry. One cannot avoid the perception that Grenholm is using an elaborate hermeneutical approach, involving an almost idiosyncratic choice of conversation partners, as an alternative to engaging a tradition that already has something to say about Christian love as a caring and protective presence with the vulnerable. This is fine; some choice of conversation partners is necessary, of course, but Grenholm’s conclusions are not as innovative as she suggests, nor is the Christian theological tradition so monolithic or bereft of similar insights.

Grenholm’s most helpful contribution is to call attention to the widespread unwillingness of contemporary human persons to acknowledge our vulnerability. An exploration of motherhood calls attention to the fact that we are all vulnerable, that vulnerability is an essential part of life, one that can be enveloped either in care and concern, as in her reading of the story of the Annunciation to Mary, or in exploitation. She asserts that “motherhood as a paradigmatic love relationship can teach us something about God’s love” (179), namely, that “God loves us as mothers love their children” (159). While this is an attractive prospect, one that many Christians, including this one, may wish to embrace, it is not clear that we need to traverse her long methodological road to reach this basic theological proposition.

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