

What is women's place in religion?

By ELIZABETH BIRD

REMEMBER THE old joke — the one where a man "dies," is revived, and gives his eagerly awaiting family the news. "I saw God!" he raves. "And she's black!"

The punchline depends on our assumption that "God" is a respectable, white male, probably an American.

While many people are now willing to entertain the possibility of an image a little more complex than the white-bearded patriarch of their childhood, and though God is even allowed to be shown as black or oriental, the "He" is sacrosanct.

WITNESS recent attempts to adapt the Bible into non-sexist language, which were met with everything from derision to outright horror.

Even Iowa Methodists, who espouse such progressive principles as opposition to organized prayer in school and rejection of "scientific creationism," recently defeated a resolution to "increase the use of inclusive language in all forms of communication."

Why are opponents of "inclusive language" so threatened by the idea that "God" may be worshipped as male and female, or even as neither?

Some openly admit that a male God proves that man is dominant over woman, thus justifying traditional sex roles, which they wish to keep; but I've heard others argue that accepting an image of God as male does not imply that in secular life men are superior to women; after all, religious hierarchies are one thing, secular hierarchies another.

As a cultural anthropologist, I am familiar with descriptions of numerous cultures in different times and places. Each society's deities reflect and represent the values that its society holds dear.

In cultures that value kin ties and lineage membership, ancestor spirits are important; those that emphasize discipline worship authoritarian gods. Where men dominate, the most important gods are male.

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As it happens, few cultures outside the Judaeo-Christian tradition have excluded the female image as completely as we have. It hasn't always been so.

ITAUGHT a class last semester in which I and my students explored the images of women in this and other cultures over time. One of the most exciting discoveries for some students was the realization that the Judaeo-Christian view of "God" has evolved over time, and that during its growth it usurped many powerful female images.

We tend to see Christian concepts as fixed, carved in stone like the tablets

of Mount Sinai. For instance, a minister at the recent Iowa Methodists' conference declared that to change the idea of a male god would alter "the understanding of the Trinity, which is basic orthodox theology."

Well, it may be orthodox now, but the idea of the trinity didn't start with Christianity.

A much older trinity was the Great Goddess, variations of whom were worshipped from Egypt to Ireland, under many different names.

The three-in-one figure represented the three stages in woman's life — maiden, mother and crone. There's a legend that tells of how St. Patrick, when preaching to prospective con-

verts in Ireland, held up a shamrock to illustrate the concept of the trinity — three leaves converging into one. What is often forgotten is that the shamrock was already the symbol of the three-in-one goddess; the green leaves were burned and scattered every spring to promote fertility.

BOTH THE biblical Jews and the early Christians, like the Greeks and Romans, consistently took over and incorporated strong female symbols, ultimately leaving orthodox Christians with only two real feminine images. One is Eve, whose sin doomed the world forever. The other is Mary, who as both virgin and mother, amalgamates two ideals in a way that is impossible to emulate.

Is it any wonder, then, that many women feel excluded from this spiritual world view, and that a growing element of feminism is a search for older, female images to worship?

Religions can and do change to incorporate the changing values of the society that believes in them; they must do so if they're not to become fossilized and irrelevant.

The Bible largely represents the evolving oral traditions of the Jews and early Christians; "orthodox theology" has fixed those traditions and prevented this natural evolution from taking place.

ANCIENT religions, which held female images as high or higher than male ones, represented cultures where, though women did not dominate, they were highly esteemed, particularly for their spiritual and procreative powers.

These cultures were gradually replaced by patriarchal societies that denigrated women and exalted only the male role in procreation. With remorseless logic, strong goddesses were wiped out and their powers appropriated by gods.

Today, society is changing again, and women are climbing back, at least in the secular sphere. Many of us do not feel the need for any deity, but for those who do, orthodox Christianity stubbornly maintains spiritual barriers that continue to leave women on the outside, looking in.