ANOTHER WAY OF BEING

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Our symbol-making, symbol-using ability as human beings permits us to make worlds of understanding. Whether they be verbal or non-verbal, denotative or expressive, literal or figurative, symbols represent, categorize and generalize our experience and when organized into systems, give us cognitive access to the universe in which we live.

Archaic peoples constructed a basically religio-mythical version of the world; in the modern West, "the movement is from unique truth and a world fixed and found to a diversity of right and even conflicting versions or worlds in the making."¹ First philosophy, and subsequently, ethics, the arts, the humanities, the sciences and the human sciences emerged as separate ways of understanding,² and each, along with the religions, provides distinct perspectives on human experience and develops its own assumptions, myths,


systematic, but also that the "feminine" way of knowing has been devalued for both women and men. That Jesus extolled and modelled meekness, servanthood, and nurturant and caring behavior towards others apart from his more "masculine" qualities may explain why more women happily identify with the Christian faith than men, and that even though George Bush, with his appeal for a "kinder, gentler nation," penned incidentally and not surprisingly by his woman speech-writer, Peggy Noonan, was a refreshing change after Ronald Reagan's "tall in the saddle" credo, nevertheless has a difficult task overcoming the public's negative image of him as a "wimp." However, to the extent that "feminine" understandings are left out of our world-making, so to that extent are our understandings impoverished and uneven.

A classic illustration of these propositions, and one close to the interests of Seventh-day Adventists, has emerged in recent years in the psychology of moral development. In his well-known study, Lawrence Kohlberg followed the moral reasoning skills of eighty-four boys for a period of over twenty years. A hypothetical moral dilemma, such as the now-famous story of Heinz, was presented to the subject. Briefly, the story is that Heinz's wife

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implications of his findings regarding the moral development of women, abandoned these neat hypothetical moral dilemmas with their tidy assumptions, and interviewed in-depth and over an extended period of time numbers of women about their own real-life crises having to do with marriage, abortion, career predicaments, and so on. She has discovered that in place of the "morality of rights," women tend to take the perspective of the "morality of responsibility," which considers connection and relationship. In other words, women's way of knowing differs from men's way of knowing in recognizing the importance of attachment in the human life cycle. Neither perspective is intrinsically wrong, but the point is that taken together they give us a fuller understanding of what it means to be a moral person in community—morality is a matter both of justice and of responsibility.

If wholistic moral understanding depends on the blending of women's and men's insights, religious understanding can scarcely afford to do less. By way of illustration, let me tell you of my pilgrimage with the message of the Song of Songs. In college Bible class, sermon and written message, all presented by males, I have been instructed that the man in the song, characterized as royal, chief, mighty, victorious, radiant, fair, and commanding, is a figure of our loving God. The woman, characterized as humble, defective, plain, lovesick, unfulfilled, immature, shy, yet cherished, represents the faulty, but hopeful church loved by God.°

Certainly, we can appreciate and know God better as we see God through


° These typical characterizations are taken from a recent account of the message of the Song of Songs by Gordon Christo, "Here Comes the Bridegroom," *Adventist Review*, 165 (July 28, 1988): 8-10.
its winsomeness, searching, patience, and self-sacrifice is a figure of other aspects of God's love. By allowing the experience of both to speak to us, we afford ourselves a more abundant understanding of God's loving relationship to us.

Lacking access to public discourse and the luxury of a time and place of their own for deliberation,¹⁰ women have operated within their own frame of reference largely intuitively and pre-reflectively. However, a current trend in the women's movement is to focus on bringing women's intuitions to articulation. The result is an infant but growing literature on "feminine" world-making.¹¹ Gilligan's work on women's moral perceptions and alternative research methods, for instance, is part of this literature.

Other fundamental constructs have been identified which reveal the tension between women's and men's accounts of the worlds they experience. Developmental psychologist, Erik Erikson, for instance, coined the expression "inner and outer space."¹² When children assembled scenes out of blocks and figures, he noticed that girls and boys tended to use space differently. Typically, the girls' scenes were interior, that is within an enclosure with elaborate doorways, and reflected an atmosphere of peace; the boys' scenes

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¹⁰ Virginia Woolf, A Room of One's Own (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1957), asks: Why is it that men have always had power and influence and wealth and fame—while women have had nothing but children?


¹² Erik Erikson, Identity: Youth and Crisis (1968), chap. vii, "Womanhood and the Inner Space."
"having a viewpoint." To know is to be enlightened, and in explaining they are likely to ask: "Do you see that?" This language represents a model of knowing which establishes truth through objective, dispassionate, detached methods. On the other hand, women have been observed reporting their coming to know as a process of "listening for a message;" they complain of not "having a voice," of "being silenced," and they will ask: "Do you hear what I am saying?" Their language represents an engaged, dialogic, involved partnership in the learning process. Women tend to find truth in conversation, narrative, journalling and personal story; men in propositions, facts and doctrines.

New age activist, Riane Eisler, explores the tension between what she identifies as "the chalice" and "the blade," root symbols for two contrasting approaches to civilization-building. The "feminine" symbol of the chalice represents the life-generating and nurturing powers, reflected in those societies where the Goddess is worshipped, human welfare is a top priority, and relationships between women and men are egalitarian; the "masculine" blade symbol points to the power to take rather than give life, to establish and enforce domination, and is reflected in those societies where the Deity is understood to be a militaristic masculine God, the emphasis is on weapons development, and hierarchical models of relationships predominate.

Each of the tensions identified to date are variations on a single major theme: "feminine" ways of being and knowing are bound up with human relationships and emphasize nurturance and caring in contrast to "masculine" differentiation and individualization emphasizing aggressiveness, forcefulness.

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In effect, the Adventist church wears a male face. After Ellen White's inestimable contribution, its most significant history is perceived to have been wrought by the deeds and decisions of men. Its people are best acquainted with its male heroes and role models because its women of faith and action are invisible. Adventist women are losing their past.

Now, its faith is articulated as systematized doctrines while it loses touch with the creative suggestiveness and rich, multi-layered meanings of the personal histories of the Old Testament and of the inter-relationships expressed in the parables and stories of the Gospels. Its God is conceived in terms of male images--father, judge and coming king--which make the divine-human relationship comprehensible to and affirming of men, but in the face of the connection and empowering that female images of God could bring to women--mother, nurse, homemaker and housekeeper--it falls silent. Its congregations sing hymns, listen to sermons and receive printed materials in language that refers to its members as men and its experiences as masculine, while women and their experiences not sung, spoken or written about disappear from its consciousness. Its hierarchical structures broker power among men; consensual, inclusive decision-making is stifled. The calling, contribution and very personhood of Adventist women today stands in jeopardy.

Because "masculine" perspectives have dominated the church's version of truth and reality, women are alienated even within their own worshipping community. The root symbols, the methods and the resulting judgments of our collective meanings, while not totally inaccessible to them, are nevertheless not drawn from their own distinctive experience of the world. Biblical scholarship and church organization are in danger of being foreign, or worse, hostile, to the women of the church, as many women are coming to realize.