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# The Kindness of God

By Janet Martin Soskice

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## 1 Summary

Janet Martin Soskice's new book entitled *The Kindness of God: Metaphor, Gender, and Religious Language* touches on various subject areas and it does so in an original way. It can be read as a collection of essays in systematic theology, as it deals with traditional *loci* such as the Trinity, Christ, anthropology, and eschatology. Soskice's interest in philosophical questions makes it interesting also for philosophers of religion, and her strong interest in feminist issues gives it a distinct feminist twist.

The introduction explains the title of the book by linking up 'kindness' to 'kinship': 'In Middle English the words "kind" and "kin" were the same—to say that Christ is 'our kinde Lord' is not to say that Christ is tender and gentle, although that may be implied, but to say that he is kin—our kind. This fact, and not emotional disposition, is the rock which is our salvation. The title of this book wants to recapture that association.' (5) The notion of kinship and kindness will return time and again in the book, as a web of associations that point to the relationality of human beings among one another, the significance of our bodily being on earth, and the understanding of God as a God for and with us in Christ, rather than far away and separate from our material being.

The first chapter is entitled 'Love and Attention', and contrasts a philosophy and religious life that remains detached and merely intellectual with one in which relationships, the concrete life and the bodily embedding of all our human life play a key role. This is brought to bear on the idea of virginity as Soskice sees it in Gregory of Nyssa and the distinction between *uti* and *frui* in Augustine, both of which she sees as pointing to a detachment from ordinary life in favour of a direct relationship with God. Soskice objects to the tendency of abstraction that is inherent in theologies that turn away from our bodily experience. Opposite to Gregory and Augustine's tendency to the 'man of reason' she places the mother, thus introducing an aspect of gender to the discussion. At the end of the chapter, she suggests that a theology that is closer to our affective way of living is not alien to Christian theology, because God's history with Israel is extended in Christian theology to include the human history of us all.

The second chapter deals with 'Imago Dei'. Drawing on a series of paintings by Jacobo della Quercia, this chapter deals mainly with questions of sexual difference and the imago Dei. Soskice takes her sources of inspiration from all sorts of angles. Augustine passes by, both in the positive aspects of his view of sexual difference, and in its problems. *Gaudium et Spes* is another dialogue partner. At the end of the chapter (49ff), Soskice argues that the question of sexual difference needs to be viewed from a Trinitarian frame of reference: 'It is evident that della Quercia's God, from his triangular halo, is a Triune God. God is three in one, unity in difference. Human beings in their createdness mirror this divine procession of love in being more than one, male and female.' (49) It must be added that elsewhere in the book, Soskice shows herself to be quite aware of the danger that is involved in suggesting mirror-structures between God as Trinity and human relationships (e.g. 161).

The third chapter bears the title 'Creation and Relation'. It deals with certain questions from the discussion between science and religion. In the chapter, the emphasis is on the question of the privileged role of human beings in the universe, and the question of whether this needs to be thought of as necessarily harmful or not. Soskice emphasizes that it need not, as long as human beings as *image Dei* are taken as mysteries that reflect the mystery of God.

Chapter four places an emphasis on gender-questions again, asking whether feminists may call God 'Father'. Soskice, however, makes no attempt at a final resolution of the problem. Almost at the end of the chapter, she goes even as far as saying: 'But what real choices does the Christian feminist have? The least problematic, as I have said, is to reject Christianity altogether.' (81) Before saying this, however, she reviews all sorts of ways of dealing with the problem – remarkably these are all 'male' solutions – that might help women who do not want to give up on Christianity. The main emphasis is on Ricoeur's symbolic interpretation of the notion of a father, a way of reading of the biblical texts in which the flexibility of the concept of fatherhood comes to the fore.

Chapter five is entitled 'Blood and Defilement: Christology'. Starting from the classical question of why Christ was man rather than woman, Soskice addresses various questions related to feminism and Christology. Sometimes, she seems to presuppose quite drastic categorizations of what men and women might prefer: 'At first sight, the deep currents that propel New Testament Christology appear entirely masculine. The Cross, with its blood and death, has not been the focus of much feminist enthusiasm. Yet can any Christian ignore the Cross? Is this really the place where, symbolically, we must see a brutal father demanding the life of a passive son? Scriptural symbols can always surprise us.' (86) Drawing on exegetical traditions from the Early Church and the Middle Ages, Soskice nuances the masculinity of Christ in such a way as to make it more inclusive: 'Christ is not always and everywhere in the symbolic order a "male" figure. There is abundant sense in seeing Christ as our mother, and his blood as the source of new life—indeed, by doing so, we recover a glorious heritage of patristic theology.' (91)

'Trinity and the "Feminine Other"' is the topic of the sixth chapter. After

reviewing various aspects of mainly French feminist reflection, Soskice turns to the question of feminism and the Trinity. Soskice rejects various attempts to feminize the Trinity, for example by emphasizing the femininity of the Spirit. She opts for an emphasis on the relationality and kinship that is inherent in an attempt to think God as Trinity rather than a single individual. Soskice even attacks secular feminism sharply when she says: ‘Secular feminism generally is not of the opinion that “God” has been very good for women, but the “God” one finds in their texts is a bit player who appears merely as a pretext for the authority of Man and men, the divine guarantor of the veracity of the insights of the Cartesian subject.’ (121) Soskice defends a relational view of human beings as well as God, in which neither men nor women can be without others.

Chapter seven presents a comparison between the doctrine of the Trinity in Julian of Norwich and Augustine. The central thesis developed in this chapter is that Augustine develops an intellectual analogy of the Trinity in the human person, whereas Julian incorporates the body and indeed the whole of the human person into the vision of God. In spite of this difference, and Soskice’s preference for Julian’s more inclusive way of developing the vision of the Triune God, Soskice sees many similarities between Augustine and Julian, for instance the aim of both texts to not only describe the Trinity as a concept at a distance, but to exercise the reader in practising what is being presented. The question of gender is interwoven with the comparison between Augustine’s and Julian’s view of the Trinity, mainly in terms of a discussion of book 12 of *De Trinitate*, where the question is raised of whether women share in the *imago Dei* in the same way as men do. Similar to the argument in the previous chapter, Soskice draws on the idea of the femininity of Christ as she finds it in Julian, criticizing Augustine for not making enough of those passages in Scripture where it is suggested that the true *imago Dei* is found in Christ, rather than human beings as such.

Chapter eight deals with friendship, starting from C.S. Lewis’ very masculine concept of friendship, men sitting together in a club or pub and discussing shared interests, and contrasting it with Buber’s *I and Thou*, in which friendship is exactly about an interest in otherness rather than sameness. The final chapter, ‘Being Lovely: Eschatological Anthropology’, functions as a coda, emphasizing the eschatological character of love, kinship and the kindness of God. Kinship is always directed towards growth, remains dynamic and is never closed in towards a specific final purpose.

## 2 Evaluation

This book is hard to review. From a formal perspective, it is not very well conceived. Its overall structure is more that of a collection of loosely connected essays than a monograph. There seems to be some related themes that link up the various chapters with one another, but these are really loose connections, and there is no clear overall argument in the book. Even the individual essays are by far not always clearly structured and well argued. Most of them would have benefited from a division into sections, and the addition of introductions and

conclusions that indicate what is going to be argued for and what conclusions have been reached at the end. Sometimes, in chapter three for example, it seems there is no argument at all.

Problems appear not only at a formal level, but also on the level of the content of the book. Although Soskice is well known for her profound knowledge of the theological tradition, she can at times be rather superficial in her reading of it. The way she links up Gregory of Nyssa's view of virginity and Augustine's notions of *uti* and *frui*, for example, calls for a bit more nuance. The same goes for the way in which Augustine is constantly accused of intellectualism. There is indeed much literature nowadays to nuance this objection. Soskice's view of the Enlightenment tradition, especially Descartes, is surprisingly negative, even reminding me of another well known theological movement with its roots in Cambridge, in which the Enlightenment is also criticized for being the cause of individualism and whatever evils can be ascribed to it. Interestingly, then, Soskice is yet very positive about Schleiermacher. Radical Orthodoxy, for its part, does not seem to have discovered this post-Enlightenment source of inspiration.

Soskice's feminism is of a special kind. I am not a specialist in feminism, but I can imagine that this book will evoke some criticism from among feminist scholars. Quite often, Soskice seems to know precisely what men are, in search of blood and power, disinterested in any care for children and household, chatting with one another in a club much like C.S. Lewis' friends. Women appear as mothers, taking care of the household, having an interest in the weak bodily aspects of human life and whatever other stereotypes of women people tend to come up with. In addition, most of the questions concerning gender and systematic theology that Soskice addresses are questions that have been well researched, and her book shows only a limited interest in this research.

This is another problem with the book worth mentioning. Although a scholar of Soskice's standing does not need to address every piece of secondary literature that touches on the topic she discusses, a bit more profound interest in what is going on in her field would have improved the quality of the work overall. The discussion of Buber's *I and Thou*, for example, seems not at all informed by the later discussions about and criticisms of it. The same goes for many issues in feminism. Similarly, Soskice plays the card of a relational theology various times, without making an attempt to develop this notion further. However, this has been done by many nowadays, so that her emphatic proposal for a relational theology seems a bit superfluous within a field in which almost everyone advocates such a thing.

However justified all of these criticisms are, and this is the reason why I have raised them, they do not do justice to the many positive aspects of this book. Perhaps one might even say that the negative side of the book is in a way the positive side. This book is not so much about rigid argument or an up-to-date discussion of ongoing debates. Its strength lies in its narrative style and its confrontation between high-profile theology and down-to-earth human experience. This confrontation is then made fruitful for theological reflection. In this sense, the meandering form of the book and the loose connections between

all sorts of themes fit well into the theology that is advocated, the kinship and kindness of both God and humanity that Soskice has in mind. This is more a book of wisdom than of science.

Let me give some examples. The chapter on the fatherhood of God, for example, opens with a beautiful remark on the present image of fatherhood:

Fathers, of any sort, get only bad press these days. Fathers—as fathers—seem only to appear in the press if associated with criminal violence of a sexual, physical, or psychological sort (usually all three) towards partners, wives, or children. Or else they appear as absent. Single parent families are overwhelmingly headed by women, while ‘fathers’ cannot, or will not, be found. Yet, in the biblical writings, naming God ‘Father’ is an anticipation of great intimacy, new relation, of hope, and of love. (66)

To be honest, in this case, and in many other cases in which Soskice offers insights of wisdom, this comment on the present image of fatherhood does not have any real function within the chapter, which is unfortunate, but still, this is but one example of the way in which the theology of this book is brought into contact with everyday life.

Let me give another example that touches on the way in which feminist issues are dealt with:

In the past I have been envious and in awe of colleagues (usually bachelors) who spend their holidays living with monks in the Egyptian desert or making long retreats on Mount Athos. They return refreshed and renewed, and say such things as ‘It was wonderful. I was able to reread the whole of *The City of God* in the Latin. . . something I’ve not done for three or four years now.’ I recall my own holidays as entirely taken up with explaining why you can’t swim in the river with an infected ear, why two ice-creams before lunch is a bad idea, with trips to disgusting public conveniences with children who are ‘desperate’, with washing grubby clothes, pouring cooling drinks, and cooking meals in inconvenient kitchens for children made cranky by too much sun and water. From such holidays one returns exhausted and wondering why people go on holiday. (13)

These remarks *are* made fruitful for the subsequent argument, in which it is argued that not only a spiritual life that detracts from the world may rightly be called spiritual, and that something is wrong with a theology that suggests such a view of spirituality. These remarks show also something of the background of Soskice’s somewhat antiquated views of the differences between men and women. I guess Soskice is well aware of the fact that the stereotypes of the men and women she is talking about in the book, do not always apply. Still, what her book highlights and this quote makes visible, is that many of these stereotypes are still deeply embedded in the structures of our society, so that in spite of all the feminism and emancipation that we have (had) in Western societies, men often still have much more opportunities for an intellectual career than women.

All in all, this book is certainly worth reading, although it lacks perhaps a certain robustness in its form. Indeed, it offers the reader quite a few moments of wisdom that its otherwise rough edges should not detract from.