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## Wives and Metaphors

GARDINER STILLWELL

When nuns are married to Christ, says Lorena Tinker in her "Comment" on Lisa Kuenning's article, "Christ's Wife" (*Quaker Religious Thought* no. 48, Summer, 1979, p. 37), their marriages are "monogamous, unlike that of [Lisa] Kuenning, Christ, and her earthly husband." And she goes on to hint that it is not quite proper to call a man a bride. Here she appears to use the old debater's device of the *reductio ad absurdum*: so twist the opponent's remarks as to make both opponent and thesis look as silly as possible.

Perhaps, however, she is not consciously reducing-to-the-absurd, but merely falls into it; and if so, the fall results, I think, from failures that are very widespread among us wives and potential wives: failure to grasp the nature and function of metaphors, to grasp the fact that they may embody vital, essential experience or profound thought even when we find their literal content distasteful, to perceive how naive it is to refuse them sympathetic attention, or at least the cool regard of scholarly detachment, when they have "offending" elements that result from historical and cultural developments that cannot now be undone. As we read the literature of the past, we can never get anywhere if we merely twitch with resentment every time we encounter an outlook or a custom that differs from our own.

First, then, as to the nature of metaphors, let us observe that when one of these implied comparisons is used, the two halves of it are not alike in all respects. Rather, they are alike in very limited respects, with the reader's pleasure and enlightenment lying in perceiving *what* respects. Take, for example, that most banal of examples, the simplest possible: "She is a rose." The rose has both male and female organs (stamens and pistil), but the speaker or writer does not wish to suggest that the "She" is a hermaphrodite. The woman's

beauty is the obvious topic; other properties, such as perishability, might enter in, depending upon context, but stamens are irrelevant.

Similarly, in "Christ's Wife," sex is not involved. Other aspects of the marriage are the relevant ones, and Lisa Kuenning lines these up for us, very clearly and very systematically.<sup>1</sup> The marriage is monogamous. (Why, surely; we are not supposed to have other gods.) It lasts forever. "It is an intimate relationship." (To the extent that the experience of such intimacy has been lost amongst us, this aspect of the metaphor will carry little weight, except as a nostalgia-item.) "The wife must be pure for her husband." (Justification and sanctification are one.) "The husband has authority over his wife," but the marriage exalts her. (Receiving Christ implies both our obedience and our being lifted up to great new heights.)

In handling all of this, Lisa Kuenning does what the best "historical criticism" has always done: she first understands her material or topic better because of her work as a historian, and she then perceives what is of enduring value in her subject of study. She sees her metaphor in relation to its background — the first and seventeenth centuries, the biblical imagery in which Fox's mind was so steeped, and the history of the first Publishers of Truth; she calmly recognizes the patriarchal element in the metaphor; and she then proceeds to profit from it anyway, as Fox did, and to show us how to do so.

Surely she is right in not letting the chauvinist content of the imagery bother her. The partnership with Christ is not a partnership of equals! Unless the bridegroom is the superior male figure of marriage in a patriarchal society, the metaphor will be untrue to the facts of the situation. It will not say what its users want it to say.

At the same time, no power can force us to like it if, after all the explaining, we still find it disgusting. Abandon it, then? Perhaps; but we shall then be missing a great deal. With metaphors as with plainer discourse, we should be able to look behind words to see where words come from; we

should look behind metaphors to see what idea or experience is there; and especially is this so when the metaphor and its freight of thought and emotion are part of someone's deepest worship-experience, and are (in effect) set before us as a message from God.

Lorena Tinker isn't the only one with a problem-metaphor on her hands. What about Quakers, all Quakers, and biblical or quasi-biblical imagery of war? Take, for example, Luther's "A mighty fortress is our God": "A bomb-proof shelter is our God," certain pacifists used to paraphrase contemptuously, thereby disqualifying themselves as metaphor-interpretors. Consider the grandeur — and the implied rejoicing over the destruction of opponents — in the psalmist's exclamation as he looks back at the Exodus: "Thy way was through the sea [he says to Jahweh],/ thy path through the great waters;/ yet thy footprints were unseen" (Ps. 77:19; all quotations from RSV). Or, for a more troublesome example, hear Moses and the people of Israel as they sing their triumph over Pharaoh's drowned army: "The LORD is a man of war;/ the LORD is his name" (Ex. 15:3).

Though the singing here is undeniably militaristic, the poem in which it occurs is one in which magnificence is piled upon magnificence from the first trumpet-call onward: "I will sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously;/ the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea" (Ex. 15:1). Yet the drowned riders, who were only obeying Pharaoh's orders, took no pleasure in their dying. Should I be taking pleasure in the poetry? Larry Kuenning helps me with this, as he regards the Exodus from the point of view of the Hebrews:

... there is that little group of refugees huddled on the eastern shore, watching as the wind dies down [if we insist upon eliminating the miraculous] and the waters return and the Egyptians struggle madly... and suddenly the voice of one of the refugees is lifted up in song... They, at any rate, know who is their Liberator who has brought them out of Egypt.<sup>3</sup>

This helps, and may lead me to take the "types, figures, and shadows" approach, and to cherish the concept of liberation

from sin; but if I am reading not the helpful explainer but the Old Testament history-books themselves, I find them replete with massacre after massacre, outrage after outrage; and by the time I come upon Samuel self-righteously hewing Agag in pieces "before the LORD" (1 Sam. 15:33), I run out of hermeneutical steam. I can't keep "types, figures, and shadows" going; I am not helped much by trying to see that ancient war of extermination as a type of the Lamb's War, fought with spiritual weapons only. I sorely need Larry Kuenning again to help me see the whole sweeping development of the Jewish saga, in which God, working mysteriously, uses his warlike people — were there peoples of any other variety? — as the soil which he cultivates in preparation for Jesus, who in turn instructs George Fox and the early Friends, both when they consider the Master's recorded words in Scripture and when they listen to his voice in day-to-day communion. "The LORD is a man of war" smacks strongly of nationalism, then, but for readers of the whole Bible it smacks also of a mighty power that was exercised on our behalf — that very life and power, the Word, in which we are called to live.

When Jahweh comes before us as Baal-like storm-god, exuberant and terrifying, God's power is still the poets' subject, but since warfare is not involved, we may be more free for simple enjoyment — or so one might suppose. The mountains quake because he is angry (Ps. 18:7), or the earth trembles merely because he looks at it (Ps. 104:32); "He rode on a cherub, and flew;/ he came swiftly upon the wings of the wind" (Ps. 18:10); he makes the clouds his chariot (Ps. 104:3), or performs wonders with his voice, which "breaks the cedars of Lebanon" and "makes Lebanon to skip like a calf,/ and Sirion like a young wild ox" (Ps. 29:5-6). He seems rather like a youthful Zeus in playful mood. For the psalmists, the real subject is that power which brought the nation safely out of Egypt. "But *that* is not God to *me!*" exclaimed one feminist in a discussion of Jahweh Cloud-rider. Very well; let Jahweh turn into Artemis upon occasion, the *point* would still be the same — the divine power. Since, however, the psalms are what they are, and were written for a warlike and

male-dominated society, and we can't erase history, it would seem that now is the time for a great poet to arise among the feminists, and create new metaphors for the deity, new images so beautiful and so powerful, and couched in so compelling a style, that we are unable to ignore them. Better that, surely, than angry complaints about the masterpieces we already have. (I might make a stab at the job myself, except that I have so far been a producer of merely pretty good poetry, which, as someone has said, is like pretty good eggs.)

I should like now to further my plea on behalf of freedom for metaphors to be themselves, by wondering aloud what it is, basically, that I so like about Lisa Kuenning's essay. She drew the wife-metaphor to my attention — but that's not the main thing. She educated me on various matters — and I am grateful, but that's not it. It is something to do with devotion. She likes the wife-metaphor because she loves Jesus. So do I; and the people I know who openly admit to this emotion are so few that my heart leaps up when one of them uncorks, and lets an avowal come spilling up and over. I think it a tragic mistake to leave the knowledge and love of Christ to the "I found it!" bumper-sticker people, yet to a large extent that is precisely what liberal Quakerism has done. There is a monstrous irony: the closer one moves to the religion of George Fox and his friends, the more isolated one is amidst all the busy gregariousness of that lonely crowd, the Meeting. One's reading, in this situation, acquires a kind of terrible importance, born of something close to desperation.

I realize, however, that merely sharing an emotion may leave one a long way short of "revolutionary faithfulness"; and I know that I have not penetrated far into the mystery of what it means to know Jesus. Yet one must begin somewhere — say with taking seriously the scriptural assurance that he is with us always, and at the same time not expecting the Word to present himself, when we open our doors, as a character in historical fiction supplied with traits "a" to "g" drawn from the gospels as "primary sources."

Bernard Canter, formerly editor of *The Friend*, has some good words for us here — when he explains why he doesn't like the British Council of Churches phraseology, "accept our

Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour." I don't share his dislike of the offending words, because I feel with Fox that one may appropriately say "God and Christ has come to teach his people himself," and because I know that Jesus saves. But I do want to share Canter's explaining:

To [the writer] Jesus is someone he knows, and most deeply loves; and through this knowledge and love of Jesus, it would seem to him, he has come to know and love and live with God. This in itself is a pretty definite Christological and Theological statement. But as to going further, as to docketing and defining further, he feels at once a most strong reluctance; first because it seems a presumption and an impiety to attempt to reduce to the compass of his understanding, and his poor resources of language, so enormous a glory, and second because he wishes to be free, to the end of his life, freely to wonder with all his heart who Jesus is, and to arrange his speculations on Jesus in a different way, and in different language, for every day of his life — or on some days not to worry, just to love. When one falls in love with another person, one may delight to spend some time attempting to define and describe to oneself or to others his or her character, personality and significance. But, whatever little definitions one may reach, that has nothing to do with loving him or her. Directly one comes into a love relationship one is touching the vast eternal. So it is, but much more, with loving Jesus. In this matter the loving silence of Cordelia has something to commend it.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, beautifully, do we find Bernard Canter expressing the emotion that he shares with Lisa and Larry Kuenning — but doing so without benefit of the wife-metaphor or any other. In view of his signal success, why don't we all just stick to plain, non-figurative declarations? Well, we are not all Bernard Canters, for one thing. But the answer, I would suggest, lies principally in "so enormous a glory": to convey even a little of its quality we need all the resources of language at our command. Metaphors like "Christ's wife" and symbols like the cross, rich with layer upon layer of meaning, asso-

ciated with our deepest emotions and our most profound worshipping, luminous with effulgences from far beyond the words — without them what deprivation would be ours!

1. *Quaker Religious Thought* no. 48, pp. 17-19.
2. *Exiles in Babylon* (Cambridge, Mass.: Publishers of Truth, 1978), p. 56. Available from the author at 1509 Bruce Road, Oreland, Pa. 19075.
3. Quoted in Leslie D. Weatherhead, *The Christian Agnostic* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1965), p. 92.

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