

Trinitarian naming and sexist sensitivity

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Our choices of words for God are made by God's choice of the actual history of which he is our object, and our assignment is to speak faithfully to this history.

Editor's note: While CMC adheres to inclusive language whenever possible, the issue of God-language is not forcefully argued by neuter gender ascriptions to God's name. With that understanding, we chose to let the author's point of view in this ongoing debate be framed in male/female pronouns that reflect the points being made.

I. Whether we regard the inherited Trinitarian name for God, "Father, Son and Spirit," as masculinist language and so indeed as rightly offensive to feminists, and whether we regard our language about God as malleable to our sensibilities and reformable when it offends them, both depend on what we think we are doing when we talk to or about God. There is a way of construing our talk of God that can be regarded as standard for the religious enterprise; and by its lights both choices just posed should be decided in the affirmative. The question is, whether *Christian* talk of God works in the standard way.

II. In the theses prepared for debate at Heidelberg in 1518 in which Martin Luther laid out his deepest theological concerns, Luther contrasted the standard construal of our knowledge of God with that which he took to be true. The eternal God being "invisible," we begin with what we can see, the temporal world around us. Of this world, we discover that it contains no sufficient reason for its own reality. Discontent with this discovery, we are launched on a process of thought, questing for the absent reason of things. As this quest succeeds, we come into position to see the initially invisible God — though this seeing is now mystic and nothing like the experience of the visible world with which we began.

Luther's thesis captures religion's construal of its Knowledge of God. By this construal, a sentence like "God loves" works as an image or a metaphor. What we talk about is never directly God; thus all our words, such as "love," are strictly inapplicable to God. If, as a step on our quest, we say "God loves," this is a projection onto the eternity we seek to populate,

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It will be our decision which of our words we project on eternity and what metaphors we work with. There is one limitation: we will choose from those words that denote some value in this world. Our vocabulary for God will reveal what we value in this world. Our use, for example, of "love" for God will reflect back to mark love as a chief good among us.

We look around for what we like about ourselves and then say God must be that. So, since we like power, we call God "omnipotent." So — to get to the controversial matter — if we honor fatherhood over motherhood, we will want to call God "Father" rather than "Mother." If we honor motherhood over fatherhood, we will want to call God "Mother" rather than "Father." If we are grandly impartial, we will invent words like Eddy's "Mother-Father." If I am most comforted by my own gender, I — being male — will want a male God. If, as is more usual, I value more the opposite gender, I — being male — will want a female God. If I denigrate gender altogether, I may invent a word like "God/ess."

It is this projective procedure which is described by the so-called "sociology of knowledge," particularly for its teaching that the worship of male/ female gods projects the structure of male- and female-dominated societies. Projection is certainly central to normal religion, but the projection is more complicated than the "sociology of knowledge" supposes.

These "sociologists" have not studied the world of religion and found that "patriarchal" societies tend to have male gods. They have deduced from Marxist principles that it *must* be so. However, if we check them, we find that male-dominated societies are as likely as not — if anything, more likely — to have female gods. Thus in the macho period of our own culture, we worshiped above all Hera, Athena and the other great Mothers and Maidens. (Zeus' dominance came later as a historically determined development.)

Clearly, religious projection is determined by much besides communal power-relations. One may suspect a tendency for each sex, in certain circumstances, to project the *opposite* gender on eternity. One may even suspect tendency for the race, all else being equal, to project female gods. Certainly we must reckon with the transformation of our divine projections by the history of religion itself.

III. But still the question is: can a description of how religion's God-talk normally works be an adequate description of *Christian* God-talk? May not Christianity's peculiarity be precisely the way it talks of God? May not this be the transformation of religion accomplished by Israel's particular religious history?

Luther thought so. According to him, the entire normal-religious construal of our God-talk is opposite to that imposed and enabled by the gospel. In his thesis 19, Luther called religion's standard way "the theology of glory." It is our final way to glorify ourselves, by projecting our own valued characteristics on the screen of eternity. It is the very heart of self-righteousness. Confronted by feminist or masculinist demands to talk of God in one's own gender, Luther could only have asked, "What else is new?"

So what construal of our talk of God *does the* gospel enable and impose? In his 20th Heidelberg thesis, Luther evoked it in point-for-point antithesis to his description of ordinary religion. Christians speak of God not in the quest for a God absent from our temporal world but rather in the attempt to reckon with a God all too obtrusively present in it. God has made himself one of the visible temporal objects of our world: Jesus hanging on a cross. There is, therefore, no religious quest to embark upon. This vision of God is given prior to all our searchings, indeed in opposition to our searchings. This does not mean there is no cognitive work to be done. There is an eternity's hard labor of understanding imposed by the fact that God makes himself our *object* at all, and moreover a suffering and disgraced object. This offends all our religious sensibilities: the object that is God blockades our projections, and there is no way to glorify ourselves by staring at a hanged felon. The offense, indeed, is the point Luther calls this the "theology of the cross," meaning a *crucifying theology*.

It is the epistemological version of the gospel, as understood by the Reformation: you do not need to project yourself to envision God. You do not need to have a God who looks like you, and you do not need to find yourself in God. You can find God in God, an actual Other, who can rule you when you are in rebellion, bring you to heaven when you are bent on hell, love you when you rightly despise yourself. YOU can find yourself in yourself, not a

weak reflection of God but a fullblooded creature, a different sort of being than God, with your own proper worth. This is Christianity's peculiarity.

By this construal, a sentence like "God loves us," uttered in the church, is merely a version for particular contexts of "That man hanged for us has been raised to be Lord." such a sentence is no more metaphorical than all language — for example, "John loves Mary" — is metaphorical. What we talk about when we talk about God is directly an object in this temporal world, and the mystery is not that we can project our words on eternity but that God subjects himself to be the object of our unprojected words.

Our choices of words for God are made by God's choice of the actual history of which he is our object, and our assignment is to speak faithfully to this history. Since Jesus was in fact male, we pray in a "Son's" name and not in a "Daughter's" name, and whether I delight or despair therein is beside the point.

On the cross's construal, the words used of God are not projections of what we value in this world. On the contrary, they describe (citing Luther's thesis) God's "hinder" and unworthy reality in "sufferings" and disgrace. It is a good thing for creatures to love, and this is not determined by our saying that "God loves" but by his command to love. It is a bad thing to crucify or be crucified, even if our discipleship may in a fallen world come to include the latter; and these do not become glorious because "God gave his Son to be crucified." Indeed, God "has become sin" for us. Our "imitation" of God is selective, on his command. God has had to be free enough to identify himself with what is good in this world and with what is bad in this world. We are simply to be guided by this identification.

Thus for Christians to call God "Father" says nothing whatsoever about whether motherhood or fatherhood is more valuable — as it also does not to call God "Mother." Both genders together can and must worship the same God and whatever language God's historical objectivity provides. I, being male, will continue to hanker for a Goddess until the Kingdom fully frees me from religious self-serving, but it is the purpose of the gospel to offend this sensibility.

In the *church* there is no connection at all between our language about God and relations of superiority and inferiority in the community — except, of course, insofar as we insist on repaganizing the church. By Christian construal, there are no inferences either way between the Goddess movement and women's demand to be heard and counted because they are women.

IV. The heart of religion is prayer. Jesus indeed founded the Christian religion in its specificity in that he taught his disciples a way to pray. Jesus said, "When you pray, pray so: 'Our Father....'" This was not a normal Jewish beginning. It was Jesus' characteristic temperity to address God as "Abba." The Christian faith began when persons were invited to share his temerity. "Address God as I do," he commanded. "Pray *with* me. Where two or three are gathered in my name, prayer will surely be heard." if we obey the invitation, we in fact pray in Jesus' and his "Father's" mutual "spirit," as the scriptures always call the mutual power of living persons.

Christians, therefore, are taught to pray *to* the "Father," *with* "the Son" and *in* "the Spirit." Thus "Father, Son and Spirit" appears in scripture as God's name because it is indeed the name for God which our Lord's history provides. We can be faithful to the history as which God makes himself our object, or we can return to more normal religion.

We may still ask why Jesus filially addressed God as "Father" rather than as "Mother." Finally, though, it does not matter. We obey Jesus' command. But if we indulge ourselves in the question, the answer is that the God he so addressed was JHWH, the God of Israel, whose grammatical gender is masculine — as my usage has assumed through this article. But why is that so?

Unless we are bound by ideology, we will suppose that the grammatical gender of Israel's God had a variety of causes, many perhaps now untraceable. Projection of patriarchy had a role, although Israel's patriarchal neighbors tended rather to the Goddesses. Probably most decisive, indeed, was Israel's struggle with those Goddesses. The revelation to Israel was through its history polemic against the fertility religion of the Near East, the final object of which was always somehow the Great Mother.

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JHWH's grammatical gender was the only possible way to deny the sexual-generative projection of God, since no one did or could worship a neuter, and the androgynous "He-She" only makes the sexual-generative metaphor more obtrusive.

It is Israel's theological history, with its crisis in Jesus, that is God's self-objectification. We are back where this diversion began. Israel's history is not the present experience; but it is the object by which Christian talk of God is controlled. There is no reason to be either exalted or depressed by the circumstance that "Father, Son and Spirit" provides neither male's with a Mother nor females with a Sister. That we need such provision is exactly what God's historical objectivity as the hanged Israelite frees us from.

V. It all comes down to this. Do we seek ourselves in God and so name him? Or does God seek us on the cross, and so name himself, contingently, historically, unsatisfactorily, beyond our values? •

Note to readers

Readers' response to this and other articles in the form of letters to the editor are always welcome and will be published as space allows.

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