Some Brief Reflections on Inclusive Language

I first encountered the problem of "inclusive language" when I was working on my doctorate quite awhile ago. The University of Notre Dame Theology Department had a policy that all written work had to use "inclusive language." At least one of the faculty members interpreted this to mean that one could not use male language in reference to deity, and would penalize students a full grade for doing so. I encountered a real problem when I wrote my dissertation and had to decide how to translate *homo* (the Latin word for "human being"). Latin does not normally use pronouns, but English does. In translating Latin "homo," should I use "man" or "human being"? Which pronoun should I use when an English translation of a Latin verb referring to the action of "homo" needed a pronoun – "he"? "He or she?" "They?"

I think the problem is less acute these days. However, if we write papers or give sermons, we still have to ask the question of how properly to refer to God and to human beings. Do we call God "she"? If God is "Father" is God also "Mother"? Do we use "man" when referring to human beings? Why or why not? Following are some short reflections:

There are a number of issues that need to be addressed. First is the issue of theological language in general.

1) The motto of my blog is "*Non sermoni res, sed rei sermo subiectus est*," which comes from Hillary of Poitiers on the Trinity. It translates approximately "The thing is not subject to the word, but the word is subject to the thing." I first came across Hillary's rule in Karl Barth, who appeals to it to make the point that the theology is always subject to its subject matter. That subject matter of theology is the Triune God i*n se*, but as known in revelation.

We have to use some kind of language to talk about God, but that language is always subordinate to the Reality of the God who has revealed himself, not our own projections. We are not free to impose any metaphors we might wish when we speak of God in the matter of Sallie McFague's *Metaphorical* Theology. The Christian claim is that God speaks, and that the canonical Scriptures are faithful witnesses to God's Word of revelation. At the same time, any human language is inherently inadequate to speak of God. No language can capture God, and our attempts at conceptualizing continually demand correction. In the words of Charles Williams, "This is Thou, This neither is Thou."

Theological language uses the distinctions of the *via negationis*, *via affirmationis* and *via eminentiae* to speak of God.

Via negationis (the negative way) denies of God all limitations characteristic of creatures. Many of the traditional "divine attributes" are not positive affirmations so much as negative denials of creaturely limitations. Divine omnipotence and omnipresence mean that God is neither temporally or spatially limited; divine eternity means that God is not subject to temporal limitations; God is Spirit means that God is not embodied; Impassibility means that God does not have passions or parts; Immutability means that God is not subject to the physical or temporal alteration – God does not "get better" or "worse."

Via affirmationis (the positive way) affirms that, as the source of all created perfections, God must *in se* contain these perfections in an eminent manner (*Via eminentiae*) and is self-dentical with them. God is not only good, but Goodness Itself. God is not only loving, but Love Itself. God is not a being, but Being Itself.

At the same time, while we can affirm positive language of God, we can form no proper concepts of God. We can apprehend

God, but not comprehend him. One of the inherent dangers of theological language is to confuse our theological conceptions with the reality to which the language refers. Theology can be incredibly flexible about the terms it uses, precisely because the terms do not encompass Divine Reality. At the same time, theology needs to be on guard that its language is not unfaithful to the reality.

Because all human language originates in created concepts, and we have no direct or immediate access to Divine reality, human language is inherently inadequate to provide proper concepts of God. Nonetheless, human language about God can provide proper judgments about God. We can affirm that certain things about God are indeed true, although such affirmations are mediated through human concepts that are inherently inadequate to express the divine reality. Because of its inadequacy to conceive divine reality, positive language is either analogical or metaphorical. Analogous language is literally true perfection language. Because God does not participate in perfection, but is himself identical with the divine perfections, such language is both universal and particular: God is not only good but goodness; God is not only just, but justice. Although expressed through creaturely concepts, the language of divine perfections applies primarily to God rather than creatures insofar as God in his self-identity is the original source of all created perfections. Creatures are created goods, because God is primarily Good and Goodness in himself, and shares that goodness with creatures.

Metaphorical language is language that is not literally true, but expresses some truth about God through comparison of some likeness with created reality: “Our God is a consuming fire.”

Second is the question of specifically gendered language about God:

1) God has given us certain kinds of language to refer to himself in revelation, and this is the primary language we use

because God has given it to us. If we take revelation seriously, we must believe that there is analogical or metaphorical correspondence between the language applied to God in biblical revelation and God's eternal reality. The primary way that God has given to refer to himself is by the Triune names: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We believe that God is Triune in himself because he has revealed himself in the history of revelation as the Father of Jesus Christ, Jesus who is the Son of his Father, and the Holy Spirit who has been sent by Father and Son.

2) Besides the Trinitarian names, Scripture provides us with other names in speaking of God. In the OT, God is YHWH, Elohim, Adonai, El Shaddai. In English translation, these generally are translated as LORD, God, Lord, God Almighty. Besides the divine names, Scripture refers to God with numerous metaphors. The metaphors are predominantly masculine, but occasionally are feminine. A crucial distinction is that between metaphor proper, and simile. Proper metaphors tend to be masculine or neutral (God IS a Warrior, a Lion, a King); feminine metaphors tend to be similes (God is LIKE a mother, LIKE a woman in labor).

A predominant metaphor in the Old Testament is that of God as the Husband or Father of Israel and Israel as bride or daughter. In the NT, this analogy is transferred to that between Christ (as Husband) and the Church (as Bride).

At the same time, the wisdom literature of the OT regularly uses a feminine personification to describe the attribute of God's wisdom (*sophia*). Significantly, in the NT, this originally feminine language is regularly referred to Christ. HE (not she) is the Divine Wisdom.

3) Divine transcendence: One of the crucial differences between religions of transcendence (like Judaism and Christianity) and religions of immanence (Hinduism) is the metaphors they use to articulate the relation between Deity

and creation. Religions of transcendence tend to use metaphors of height (God is in “heaven”) and masculine language to characterize divinity (God as Father). Religions of immanence use metaphors of embodiment (the world as God’s body) and feminine imagery (mother goddess). This is not consistent across the board, however. Scripture speaks of the Spirit as brooding over the waters, and indwelling the church. Hinduism has male gods like Brahma who do not transcend created reality.

4) Monotheism: that God is One is a crucial distinctive of Biblical faith. The masculine imagery of God (particularly in the OT) does not make the point that God is male (he is never described below the waist), but that God has no partners (there is only one God, and the God of the Bible has no consorts) and God is distinct from creation (the earth is not God’s body).

5) Pronouns: That God is personal demands that we use personal pronouns in referring to God. Such personal pronouns do not mean that God is “sexed,” but that God is personal (God is not an “it”). God is not sexed because God has no body. Refusal to use any pronouns (repeated and exclusive references to “God” or “God-self” or “Divinity”) present the image of an impersonal God. In normal usage, the pronoun “she” really would seem to imply that God is “sexed.” The preferred pronoun “he” is used, not because God is male (again, God has no sex), but because God is not an “it.”

6) Some have suggested that because the Hebrew (*ruach*) in the OT is feminine in gender, we should refer to the Spirit with female pronouns (“she”). Insofar as the primary imagery of the Spirit is that of immanence, there might be some logic here. However, this seems to be confusing grammatical gender (which English does not have), with sexuality. There is no correspondence between grammatical gender and sexuality. Moreover, in the NT, the Greek *pneuma* is neuter, when Jesus refers to the Spirit, he uses the masculine pronoun (*ekeinos*),

and the masculine “Comforter” (*parakletos*).

Conclusion: If we are going to be faithful to the language of biblical revelation, we should use the primary biblical language of the Triune names (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) in referring to God. The proper pronoun would be “he.” At the same time, there are numerous feminine similes applied to God in the Bible (God is not “mother,” but God is “like a mother”), and these should not be avoided, but encouraged.

To reiterate, use of the Triune names in reference to Deity and the masculine pronoun follows the language of biblical revelation. It does not imply that God is male, because God is not sexed. The use of “he” in reference to God does not mean that God is male, but that God is personal.

Use of inclusive language in reference to human beings is a rather different question.

1) The primary purpose of language is to communicate. Language evolves and changes over time, and what communicates at one time does not necessarily communicate at another.

2) The church should avoid getting involved in the politically charged culture wars. We have no stake in taking sides at either preserving or demolishing “the patriarchy.” The church has fundamentally different loyalties.

3) The “offending” words are the generic “man” and the masculine pronoun “he.” While previous generations used these regularly in both an inclusivist sense (“human being”) and an exclusive sense (“male human being”), English language use has considerably changed, and many (perhaps most) now hear the word “man” in only an exclusivist sense.

4) English has a peculiarity in that it does not distinguish between an inclusive and exclusive use of “man.” Latin, for example, distinguishes between *homo* (human being), *vir* (male human being), and *femina* (female human being). Greek

distinguishes similarly between *anthropos*, *aner*, and *gune*. In Middle English, *man* was “human being,” *wer* was “male human being,” and *wifman* (woman) was a female human being. In modern English, *wer* has long ago fallen out of use.

5) It seems that any contemporary English document should use language in the way that it is used by the general population. While “man” seemed to be avoided for a couple of decades, it now seems to have found its way back into the general population. “Man” (with a capital M) is regularly used by the media and popular culture to refer to “humanity” or “humankind.” “Man” (small “m”) is also regularly used in reference to “male human beings.” However, the pronoun “he” seems regularly understood to refer only to a male human being. “Men” (plural) is never understood to mean “human beings” (plural) but “male human beings” (plural). A document that deliberately reverted to the terminology of forty years ago would be understood to be deliberately provocative. People would notice not the content of the language, but the way it was used. Whether intended that way or not, the document would be read as “sexist.”

6) The ESV translation of the Bible has adopted what I think is a good compromise. “Man” (capitalized) is used for Greek or Hebrew “human being.” “Man” (not capitalized) is used in referring to male human beings. When no gender is present in the original Hebrew or Greek, “Man” or “man” are not used. ESV does not use “men” for plural human beings, but “humans,” “people,” etc.

7) My own standard practice when writing is to use “human being,” “human,”or “humankind,” when the context calls for generic “human being,” but sometimes “Man,” as in Aristotle’s definition of humanity as “Man is a rational animal.” For pronouns I use “he or she” or “one.” I do not use “they” to refer to individual human beings, although many of my students do, as did even Jane Austen almost 200 years ago. (That just seems grammatically awkward to me.) For the plural, I use

“human beings” “humans” or “people,” not “men,” unless I am referring to more than one male human being. I think my students (particularly those under 30) would hear consistent use of “man” and “men” as referring to males. The plural of “brothers” should be “brothers and sisters.” Siblings sounds too formal.

Whatever It Is, I’m (Not Necessarily) Against It!

I used to be a regular participant at the two most frequented “conservative” Episcopal/Anglican blogs. I refuse to comment at one at all any more, and do no more than make the occasional comment at the other.

Why? While I consider myself an orthodox Anglican, I do not in any sense of the word consider myself a “conservative.” I reject the term “conservative” when applied to orthodox Christianity because, first, it is a meaningless term. “Conservative” only makes sense as an adjective. “Conservative” as to what? What do I think it worthwhile to “conserve”? Furthermore, “conservative” only makes sense in a spectrum from “conservative” to “moderate” to “progressive,” a spectrum in which both ends and middle constantly shift. A generation ago, I would have been considered a “moderate” in the Episcopal Church. Without having moved, the same positions I held then, are now considered “conservative” or even “fundamentalist.” Finally, “conservative” too often confuses the realms of politics and religion. To embrace any political ideology, whether it calls itself “conservative” or “progressive” is a betrayal of the gospel. If Jesus Christ is Lord, he stands in judgment on all political positions.

However, “conservative” can also mean “reactionary,” and this is more and more what the term means on the two most widely read “conservative” Episcopal/Anglican blogs. A “reactionary” is someone whose position can be summarized in the lines from Groucho Marx’s song from the movie Horsefeathers:

“I don’t know what they have to say
It makes no difference anyway;
Whatever it is, I’m against it!”

More and more frequently in the last year or two, discussions on these two blogs have become a constant repetition of Groucho’s theme. I first began to notice “Groucho-ism” in the comments in response to blog posts in which orthodox Anglicans would be accused of various “politically incorrect” offenses by their opponents. I often found myself preparing to respond to the accusations by protesting that they were stereotypical caricatures, only to discover that I had been beaten to the punch by commenters who had already gotten there first, not only failing to renounce the criticisms as caricatures, but rather enthusiastically embracing the “caricature”: “You think conservative Christians don’t care about the environment? Darn right! Environmentalism is an invention of atheists who love trees more than people! There is no such thing as global warming, and I drive the biggest gas-guzzling SUV I can afford!”

I then began to notice that even before looking at comments, I could predict the direction in which discussion would flow. Predictably, if the posts were about any political or theological position that was even slightly to the left of the extreme far right of the political or theological spectrum, the Groucho refrain would kick in, “Whatever it is, I’m against it!”

The end really began for me with last year’s political election in which I could predict that any discussion having anything to do with Barak Obama would produce myriad posts of

unthinking vitriol in which Obama would be accused of every imaginable evil. I had hopes that once the election was over, conversation might return to a more thoughtful tone. Instead, both blog sites have become “all Obama, all the time.” Even in discussions that have nothing to do with politics, Obama’s name will frequently appear. Any time someone writes or says something with which commenters disagree, this shows that the offending party is just like Obama.

At one of the sites today, there was a post indicating that Reinhold Niebuhr is President Obama’s favorite theologian. The responses were predictable. Anyone liked by Obama had to be bad, and immediately Niebuhr was attacked as a “relativist,” and a “socialist.” While Niebuhr does not stand in my top list of theological influences, he was one of the most important theologians and political thinkers of the twentieth century. I noted that “Amidst the superficial partisan soundbites that have passed for political discourse in this country for the last three decades or more, a little dose of Niebuhr would be a helpful tonic.” And, of course, the original commenter responded by simply affirming his original sound bite. Or, in the words of Groucho, “Whatever it is, I’m against it.”

I have great hopes for the future of orthodox Anglicanism in North America. I work at a seminary with some of the most intelligent and thoughtful orthodox Christian biblical scholars and theologians I have met anywhere. I teach students who have made great sacrifices to pursue ordination for an uncertain future in which many of them will be starting churches in store fronts and gymnasiums. I have gotten to know just a little some of the leaders of this movement, including Archbishop Bob Duncan, and global leaders like Primate Mouneer Anis. I am amazed at how much the people in this community love one another, and at how they pray and worship together.

If orthodox Anglicans commit ourselves to be transformed by the gospel, including the challenging of our favorite prejudices, God may well bless our efforts. At the same time,

there is a dark underbelly to this “conservative” Anglican movement. If we define ourselves as a church in reaction, we deserve to fail. Jesus did not die so we could say, “Whatever it is, I’m against it!”

Addendum: As an experiment, I did a search on the more restrained of the two blogs, ostensibly concerned primarily with Anglican/Episcopal matters.

On TitusOneNine, I found the following number of references in titles, entries, and comments:

Obama 1746
Schori 1258
Rowan 1494
Duncan 774

It makes it very difficult to make the case that the disagreement between “conservative” Episcopalians/Anglicans and “progressives” is about theological disagreements rather than politics when President Obama is more of a topic of conversation in articles and comments than either the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, the Archbishop of Canterbury, or the head of the new Anglican Province in North America.

Using Caesar’s Sword to Promote Christian Marriage

There has been a discussion at TitusOneNine about the movement among Christians and other groups in California – including Hindus and Muslims – to organization in opposition to same-sex marriage. At least one individual who claims to be an orthodox

Christian is opposed to this because it means Christians are "manipulating Caesar to force Christian sacraments on the empire. . . . Conservative christianity cannot be salt and light by means of Caesar's sword."

This is my response.

In the history of Christian social thought, there have been at least the following models of the relation between church and state:

1) Separatist—the model of radical Anabaptism. The most vivid contemporary example might be the Amish, who, as much as possible, live separately from the rest of the culture, do not participate in politics, do not bear arms, live in their own communities.

2) Government as corrective of sin—Augustinian/Lutheran. In a fallen world, the primary responsibility of government is to punish evildoers and provide a safe space for the Church to preach the gospel and administer the sacraments. Luther's "two swords" analogy illustrates the distinction. There are some things the state does that the church does not do, and vice versa. The state enforces law and executes punishment on criminals; the church does not.

3) Promotion of the Common Good—Thomist/Aristotelian/Hooker's Anglicanism. "It is not good for the man to be alone." God created human beings to be social animals. For humans to live together, there needs to be government to enable cooperation to promote human flourishing. The state not only punishes wrong-doers, but also takes positive steps to enhance human community and preserve the orders of creation. For example, anyone who uses the internet or drives an automobile on public streets is benefiting from a state that takes positive measures to promote the common good.

4) Transformationist—Calvinist. Inasmuch as possible, the state should work to transform society to promote Christian

values, and anticipate the Kingdom of God. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s "I have a dream" speech is a prime example. As I was watching the speeches at the Democratic convention last night, and I heard Ted Kennedy preach "Health care is a right, not a privilege!," I was aware of just how much this Calvinist vision is alive in American culture.

5) Catholic subsidiarity/Reformed sphere sovereignty. (David Koyzis discusses this in his Political Visions and Illusions (InterVarsity, 2003)). There are numerous groups and cultures within a given society—churches, government, businesses, voluntary organizations, clubs, guilds, schools, etc. Each has its own realm of integrity and problems happen when groups trespass their bounds. The realms of the family or the schools, for example, are not the realms of either the state or the church; they have a genuine integrity of their own that both state and church need to respect.

6) Secularist separatism. Religion is a private matter of individuals and voluntary organizations. The realm of government is the realm of the public. The government should respect the right of religions to keep their own rules within their private environs, but the churches have no right to impose their private morality on the state or culture as a whole, and, if necessary, the state can pass laws that affect public matters that private voluntary organizations like churches must respect. So, for example, a Christian wedding photographer can be fined for refusing to photograph same-sex blessings. Catholic adoption agencies cannot discriminate against unmarried or gay couples.

There are, of course, other models.

Of the above six models, only 1) and 6) would suggest that the church has no business pushing against same-sex marriage. In any society of which Christians are citizens, Christians have

the same privilege and duty to act in the public square as do other citizens.<more/>My own leanings are toward models 3) and 5). I would argue that heterosexual marriage is neither a creation of the state nor of the church, but is an ordinance of creation that pre-existed both. From a theological view, Genesis 1 and 2 is decisive. From an anthropological and historical view, it is clear that the heterosexual family predates not only government, but also cities and cultures. It was the heterosexual family that enabled cities, cultures, and eventually governments to be formed.

If the purpose of the government is to promote the common good, then the government has a moral obligation to promote the prospering of the heterosexual family, and to discourage cultural movements that would harm it. At the same time, because the family is a separate sphere, the government has to respect its freedom in that sphere. The government, for example, has no right to create a new definition of family by blessing same-sex unions. That is a violation of the family's sphere of sovereignty. Because there needs to be some kind of coordination for human cooperation to take place, and there needs to both positive and negative enforcement of activities that benefit or harm the family, the government (by default) can establish laws to regulate such things as legal age of marriage, regulations of divorce, whether or not polygamy is permitted, compulsory childhood education, specific penalties for such specific violations of marital good as incest, domestic abuse, sexual predation, etc.

Similarly, the church also has the right to decide within its own sphere what are the requirements of Christian marriage, but the church neither creates marriage, nor has the right to change it. The church can forbid divorce to its members, specify who can or cannot be married within a church, but cannot bless things that would violate the very definition of marriage, e.g., same-sex unions.

Insofar as Christians are citizens, they certainly have not

only the right, but the obligation to promote legislation that helps the family to flourish, and to resist legislation that harms it.

To complain that such legislation is coercive is to miss the point that all legislation is coercive. If the government passes a law that says I must drive on the right side of the street, I am interfering with the freedom of those of British ancestry who might prefer to drive on the left side of the street, but I am also preventing the deaths that would inevitably result if everyone was allowed the freedom to simply drive on whatever side of the street they preferred. Those who cannot have their sexual relationships blessed by the church or the state certainly have restrictions on their freedom to do what they wish, but this is true not only of same-sex couples, but of all whose sexual activity falls outside the norms of what it properly means to be family—certain consanguinous relationships, underage relationships, polygamy, etc.