

# 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 *in 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-identical 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.