

God Language: The Deeper Issue

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A decade ago, in the early 1980s, Richard Rhem preached a sermon entitled “The Gender of God: The Humanness of Jesus.” The message brought that day pointed to the wonder of the incarnation being not that God had visited us in *male* flesh but that God had “pitched a tent” in *human* flesh. Then in 1986, in this journal, Rhem developed that theme further in an article entitled “The Accident of the Incarnation” using *accident* in its philosophical sense of not belonging to the essence of the matter. Never in the decade of the eighties was there a ripple of consternation from the Christ Community congregation. That the incarnation transcended human gender differentiation seemed apparent to all. That God was not choosing maleness over against femaleness in this revelatory act appeared to stand uncontested.

Then in the Epiphany season of 1992, we determined as a ministry team that the community’s commonly held biblical-theological understanding should find bolder and more obvious expression in both our worship experience and our liturgical forms. We had been sensitive to sexist language—using masculine pronouns less and less in prayers, sermons, and hymnody, publishing in bulletins our intention to be an inclusive community. But on a fateful Sunday morning in January we proposed that the community join us in addressing God as “Our Mother/Father who art in heaven...” The reaction from a vocal few was immediate and sharp. We had touched a nerve and discovered that many had not truly understood the implications of our earlier theological conclusions.

We had been naive. A good friend, learning of the rumble we had caused and our dismay, chided us gently for failing to see that a little tinkering with language was

hardly sufficient to get at the larger issue of male domination in the church, reinforced perhaps by sexist language but hardly caused by it. He wrote,

True, we need to change our language. But I am not as hopeful as you seem to be about language changes constructing a new social reality. An emergent reality (a true *novum*) will forge its own language (as has always happened, from the emergence of Christianity to Marxism), but I am not sure, especially in our age when we play fast and loose with words, that a reformation in language will bring a reformulation of social reality. Rescripting the present “paradigm” merely relieves points of potential rupture and allows the old story to continue.

He was alerting us to the painful reality that little real change happens until there is a reduction to chaos. He cites Simone Weil who wrote of the necessity of “decreation.” His final shot was a suggestion that we fully engage the issue, for it might just be time for us all “to chaoticize, deconstruct, decreate.”

After such a cogent puncturing of our noble project we were forced to plunge more deeply into the relationship of language and social reality. Our friend is quite right; we are dealing with a paradigm shift of major proportion. In *Speaking the Christian God*, Janet Martin Soskice cites Rosemary Radford Ruether making the point sharply:

We cannot simply add the “mothering” to the “fathering” God, while preserving the same hierarchical patterns of male activity and female passivity. To vindicate the “feminine” in this form is merely to make God the sanctioner of patriarchy in a new form. (“The Female Nature of God,” *Speaking the Christian God*, 66)

Soskice adds,

Similarly, tinkering with the language of the liturgy, changing “he” to “he and she,” may be a cosmetic change which, from the feminists’ point of view, conceals a more profound and idolatrous teaching to pray to a male God. (*Speaking the Christian God*, 86)

What this foray into language has revealed is the critical challenge that feminist theology throws out to the classical Trinitarian and Christological creedal formulations that came to expression in the philosophical language and conceptuality of the first five centuries of church history. Such an expression was a proper and necessary translation of the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth and the experience of the apostolic community, but it was a culturally conditioned translation fully as much as any contemporary theological formulation in the post-modern paradigm (e.g., liberation, black, or feminist theology).

Hans Küng contends that, ironically, it was Karl Barth who inaugurated the post-modern paradigm that is so explicitly grounded in human experience (the experience of suffering and oppression). Barth had turned sharply from experience as the ground for knowledge of God. His particular target was Schleiermacher, who grounded faith in God in the “feeling of absolute dependence.” Barth found the Protestant liberalism of the nineteenth century so in tune with European culture that there was no word of judgment or grace to address to the social chaos in the aftermath of the First World War. In his struggle to find a word for preaching, he wrestled with Paul’s “Letter to the Romans.” He found there the God who is “Wholly Other.” His conviction about the deceitfulness of human experience was confirmed when he witnessed his esteemed professors of theology sign on with Hitler’s National Socialism, the movement that led to the Second World War and the horrors of the Holocaust. His whole great theological project was posited on the conviction that only God reveals God; knowledge of God is the gift of God effected by the miracle of the Holy Spirit. Against Brunner he denied that there is anything in the human person that provides a “point of contact” for divine revelation.

Such a radical position drew criticism. Bonhoeffer spoke of Barth’s theology as a “house without doors.” There was no way to get in if one were not already in. Bonhoeffer called it “Revelational Positivism.” Paradoxically, from the perspective of the present it is evident that Barth’s theology did not arise apart from his own personal, existential experience; it was precisely in reaction to that experience that his theology took shape!

After Barth turned the tide of European theology in the first half of this century, the pendulum began to swing back to the pole of experience. In the revision of his *Christian Faith* (1985), Hendrikus Berkhof added one entirely new section—paragraph ten—entitled “Revelation and Experience.” The place of experience also played a considerable role in his *Introduction to the Study of Dogmatics* (1982). He points to some theologians through the centuries who have a special gift for sensing shifts taking place in a given culture and in human perception—people like Augustine, Luther, Wesley, Barth, and Küng, who experience existence very differently from previous generations. In such instances new experience calls forth a new language of faith. In former times such prophetic voices have been labeled heretical. But today there is a growing recognition and acceptance of a plurality of faith formulations. For, as Berkhof writes, “someone may be so driven by a series of experiences that his personal faith and theology affect the very nerve of the tradition of faith.” He speaks of “ahead-of-the-pack” thinking arising in recent decades from unexpected sources:

The unheard-of phenomenon of groups of believers, previously not at all part of the dogmatic process, who began to intervene in it. Pacesetting dogmatists ... giving expression to the faith in a way that was hardly recognizable to those who had learned to read the Bible from the perspective of a very different set of experiences... In their best works they

give evidence of new discoveries made in Scripture. To the “official” practitioners of dogmatics they pose the question of what unconscious conditioning factors have had their distorting or inspiring effect on them. (26)

We have come to recognize that it is not enough to refer to Scripture, the creedal tradition, and the transconfessional dimensions of ecumenicity “as the funding sources of dogmatics.” This becomes evident when these are held in common, yet opposite experiences may make our respective interpretations of the gospel mutually unintelligible.

This is, of course, the flash point of contemporary controversy. Berkhof raises the question, “[I]s it our duty radically to exclude the factor of our life experiences?” But he then further asks, “Who can jump over his own shadow?” Of course we cannot. The call for contextual theology has simply made us aware of our own contextuality—the fact that no theology arises out of a cultural vacuum devoid of experience.

In reference to the claims of Third World theologians and First World feminist theologians for whom experience is the key to theological understanding, Berkhof contends,

We cannot cancel out their bewilderment by proclaiming: “Not what we say is important but what the Scripture says” or the question is, “Who is Christ himself?” All our central words such as “salvation,” “Christ,” “Church,” and “Scripture,” have a much more contextual shape and focus than we are aware of. (71-72)

Rosemary Radford Ruether in her seminal work, *Sexism and God-Talk* (1983), asserts:

What have been called the objective sources of theology; scripture and tradition are themselves codified collective human experience.

She further declares:

Human experience is the starting point and the ending point of the hermeneutical circle. Codified tradition both reaches back to roots in experience and is constantly renewed or discarded through the test of experience. “Experience” includes experience of the divine, experience of oneself, and experience of the community and the world, in an interacting dialectic. Received symbols, formulas, and laws are either authenticated or not through their ability to illuminate and interpret experience. Systems of authority try to reverse this relation and make received symbols dictate what can be experienced as well as the interpretation of that which is experienced. In reality, the relation is the opposite. If a symbol does not

speak authentically to experience, it becomes dead or must be altered to provide a new meaning. (12-13)

What the feminists have uncovered is the sociology of theological knowledge putting the lie to the claim that its ground is an objective, divine, and universal authority apart from human experience.

Here, of course, we arrive at a watershed of understanding. With our present knowledge of the development of dogma, our knowledge of that process in the early centuries of creedal formulation with the intervention of emperors and the political motivation of popes and patriarchs, one can hardly deny an historically conditioned understanding of all theological formulation. In *Theology for the Third Millennium*, Hans Küng reminds us that new prophetic traditions are not born in a cultural vacuum. New paradigms, while incorporating the truth of the old paradigm, break through with new revelatory insight. Then at some point in the process this new insight comes under the control of leaders who institutionalize the inaugurating vision. A series of criteria are imposed to determine the correct interpretive line, and soon the new paradigm begins to ossify.

If, however, present experience is sidelined or denied a place in the continued development of theological understanding, those for whom the symbols no longer illumine their experience of being human may well drop out, abandoning the faith of their foremothers and forefathers. Janet Soskice asks, “Does the ‘father God’ have a future?” She answers:

If Christianity has a future, then the answer is probably “yes.” But it would be reasonable for a dispassionate student of religions to wonder whether Christianity will survive the rapid changes taking place—around the world, not just in the privileged West—in women’s self-understanding. In my opinion, Christianity now faces a serious challenge, and one that addresses core metaphors, narratives, and ideologies. ... It may be that Christianity will not meet the challenge or will linger on as a pleasing anachronism distant from the life of the cultures it inhabits. You may well think we are watching yet another stage in the death throes of a dinosaur. (*Speaking the Christian God*, 94)

Christian faith need not die unless we cling to symbols and forms that no longer mediate the truth in compelling fashion, idolizing the medium and confusing it for the message itself. In his journal, *Morning Light*, Jean Sullivan writes,

Your certitudes—are you so blind? What are they generally based on? The failure to deepen your knowledge. We rush past questions in order to avoid anxiety....

Some weep for the certitudes of the past. We must preserve, they say, this or that which was beautiful and good. Perhaps that’s true, but those who

complain like that are weeping for themselves. In the last analysis, we shouldn't weep but create. Gothic churches were built over Romanesque structures, which were built over pagan fountains and temples. To create is the only important thing, to rediscover the fervor that produced the thing you're weeping for. (123-24)

The legitimate place of experience in theological formulations given voice by Küng, Berkhof, Ruether, and Sullivan among others seems to us beyond refute. But refuted it is. An example is *Speaking the Christian God*, subtitle: "The Holy Trinity and the Challenge of Feminism," eighteen essays addressing the question of the use of *Father* as a designation for God. Covering the spectrum from moderate to strident, the necessity of the Father designation is defended as the sine qua non of classical, Western, Trinitarian theology, indeed of Christian faith. This is an excellent collection of essays for identifying that the stakes in the feminist challenge run deeper than a superficial adjustment of pronouns. What is maintained almost uniformly throughout from various perspectives—language theory, worship, as well as creedal formulation—is that feminist claims must be denied because they undercut cherished creedal paradigms as well as a traditional orthodox reading of Scripture. Without the slightest apology or concession for possible human fallibility, the opinions of Church Fathers and early Christian councils are cited as pronouncements of eternal and divine truth. Present experience of ecumenical councils, popes, bishops and church leaders would seem to alert us to the ever-present political and personal agendas that dog very human leaders. Our contemporary understanding of parliamentary procedures and authorized committee reports should caution us that as Ernest Campbell has noted, "There was a lot of good stuff left on the cutting room floor!" Many of the writers in *Speaking the Christian God* seem to forget that the distance of centuries removes us from the passionate conviction of the opposition's arguments as well as votes that at times were almost too close to call.

That is precisely the claim of Ruether. And her exegetical work is impressive. It is remarkable that the appeal for preserving the Father designation in Christian usage in *Speaking the Christian God* is replete with references to the writings of the Church Fathers and the ecumenical councils but wrestles little with biblical material. The defenders of the classic creedal formulations have not gone back far enough! In absolutizing the formulations of the post-apostolic period when the gospel moved out into a Hellenistic world, the writers in *Speaking the Christian God* attribute an authority to those formulations that failed to recognize that these were already translations of the revelatory events. These formulations pulsed with passionate human experience in a cultural context that supplied the linguistic and philosophical tools by which to bring that experience to expression. But the experience of the post-apostolic age is hardly ours, and the language and philosophical conceptuality are alien to us on the threshold of the third millennium.

Stephen M. Smith in “Worldview, Language, and Radical Feminism: An Evangelical Appraisal,” (one of the essays in *Speaking the Christian God*) writes that we live in a time of massive cultural conflict. This conflict, he says, “is in reality a clash of worldviews.” Right! And is it not about time? There was no significant threat to the philosophical worldview within which the classic creedal formulation came to expression until the eighteenth century. But consider what has happened since. Not only have there been revolutionary breakthroughs in our understanding of the physical universe, but even more significant for our present focus, the rise of historical thinking has illumined the process of development of human understanding.

Could it be that the classic paradigms, once the Spirit’s medium for the revealing of the living God, must be dismantled to make room for a new paradigm that takes up the truth of the old but makes space for the emergence of the new?

One theologian who is seeking to bring to expression a new understanding of God in light of contemporary experience is Sallie McFague. She receives sharp criticism from Smith for holding a monist world view, which she acknowledges, but in the sense of panentheism, which *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* defines as “the belief that the Being of God includes and penetrates the whole universe, so that every part of it exists in him, but (as against pantheism) that his Being is more than, and is not exhausted by, the universe.”

The issue must not be whether McFague challenges and undercuts the orthodox world view, but whether or not her models of God are able to illumine more adequately our present human experience as she wrestles with the biblical story and the revelation that was en-fleshed in Jesus. In her probings, McFague is engaged in the very process that is the responsibility of every serious theologian—testing the received tradition and bringing it to fresh expression. Otherwise dogmatics becomes fundamentalist, the mere reiteration of formulations that illumined yesterday’s experiences, and that is idolatry.

A much more sympathetic reading of McFague comes from James Fowler who writes,

She ... makes clear that we require new metaphors if our faith is to enable us to make sense of our contemporary experiences.... In our religious language we are naming ourselves, one another, our world, and our relatedness to God in terms from bygone times. Such anachronistic names, helpful in earlier times, are distorting and hurtful now. (*Weaving the New Creation*, 61)

Brian Wren, a minister in the Reformed Church of England is well known as a writer of meaningful contemporary hymnody. In his book *What Language Shall I Borrow?* he addresses the concerns and issues that motivated him to write such hymns as “Bring Many Names,” in which he expands our language horizons by referring to God as:

Strong mother God, working night and day,
Planning all the wonders of creation...

Warm father God, hugging every child,
feeling all the strains of human living...

Old aching God, grey with endless care,
calmly piercing evil's new disguises...

Young, growing God, eager, on the move,
seeing all, and fretting at our blindness ...

Great, living God, never fully known,
joyful darkness far beyond our seeing ...

The poem that opens *What Language Shall I Borrow?* a poem written by Wren, sums up his understanding that language can be one step in the process of freeing ourselves from idolatrous attachment to earlier faith expressions.

The Main Question

If
every naming of God
is a borrowing from human experience,
And if
language slants and angles
our thinking and behavior;
And if
our society
makes qualities labeled "feminine"
inferior to qualities labeled "masculine,"
forming women and men
with identities steeped in those labelings,
in structures where men are still dominant
though shaken
and women still subordinate
though seeking emancipation...

Then it follows that
using only male language
("he," "king," "father")
to name and praise God
powerfully affects our encounter with God
and our thinking and behavior;

So that we must then ask

*whether male dominance and female subordination
and seeking God only in male terms
are God's intention
or human distortion and sin;
For if
these things are indeed
a deep distortion and sin,
So that
women and men are called to repent together
from domination and subordination,*

*Then how
can we name and praise God
in ways less idolatrous,
more freeing,
and more true
to the Triune God
and the direction of love
in the Anointed One, Jesus?*

His prolific production of hymns for worship is his answer to “The Main Question.” And that brings us back to where we began. The letter from our friend is full of profound insight—a little cosmetic tinkering with the language of worship is not enough. We have to do with a far more profound issue, indeed, with the necessity of a whole new paradigm for our speaking of God. And that will probably come about only through chaos and decreation. But in the meantime it is not unimportant to watch our language as a sign that the Christian community is honestly listening for the ways in which God may be coming to us through the voices of experience.

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