

THE MIND OF THE CHURCH & the mind of my church:

Christianity's pronouns

Occasion of this Thinksheet:

Yesterday, for the 1st time, the national planning committee of "Confessing Christ," the United Church of Christ's movement for the defense & promotion of classical Christianity as set forth in the Preamble of the UCC's Constitution, debated the use-or-suppression of Christianity's (all-masculine) pronouns for God. Of the 14 members, 4 were vigorously for use & 1 was vigorously for suppression; 3 spoke in hope that some compromise or transcendence will emerge; 2 considered suppression "heresy," but 1 of the 2 (namely, I) was (1) disinclined to press for what the U.S. Senate is now calling "an up-or-down vote," & (2) suggested that the matter be put in the category of "disputed questions inside the [sacred] tent."

Here are a few of my reflections since the debate:

1 Both sides can offer **Feuerbach** as a caution.... They--the pronouns suppressors--argue that referring to God as "he" plays into F.'s hands: the heaven-Father is nothing but a mirror ("projection," F. said) of earth-fathers.... We--the pronouns supporters--reply that depriving God of the *personal* pronouns plays into F.'s hands because F. wants God deprived of everything personal, even his *person*: eliminating the God-pronouns makes F. & the devil smile.

2 Debaters need to step back occasionally to ask about situation-definition, to do reality-checking, to inquire as to what's been left out (& the relative importance of left-out items), to suspect that the fracas may have overblown the issue relative to other issues (thus giving the issue disproportionate importance). Let's look at this last:

3 How stands this issue....

....in the Mind of the Church through the ages & around the world? It was & (except for small pockets of Caucasian liberal Christians in the last 3rd of the 20th c.) is a **non-issue**.

....in the mind of my church, the UCC? We are **doubly-split**. Our national leadership is intolerant: the pronouns for God are impermissible & are regularly eliminated from all materials submitted for publication. (Recently, the author of a book-chapter was surprised to find that the UCC publisher had made 64 God-language changes without her authorization.) (The original committee for producing THE NEW CENTURY HYMNAL was dismissed because of its refusal to knuckle under to the official speech-inhibitions, including no pronouns for God.) This ugly (&, in a liberal church, hypocritical) intolerance extends downward among some judicatory-&-congregational clergy. Earlier, the intolerance had moved swiftly upward from radical feminists in seminary classrooms, in church assemblies, & in congregations--often by disruptive behavior.... But on this issue split vertically, the UCC is split also horizontally: theologians take sides; & while most congregations are unaware or indifferent, some withdraw from the UCC & a few actively agree with "the management" (the national censorship code).

4 Caught in embarrassing situations, fallen human beings put the best ego-spin they can manage (in one word, "rationalize"). On the pronouns issue, what began as a timid concession is now "spun" as a move to improve (1) theological expression (by clarifying that God is not male) & (2) Christian proclamation's rhetorical posture. But let's see....

5 This self-protective, self-promotive move has, in both its thrusts, the **reverse** effect.... Theologically, the pronominal void has created a vacuum sucking the goddess into the deity category. The voiders will never say *he*, but some of them are growing bolder in writing/saying *she*. (The prophets preached Asherah out of the temple, but she's now being let back in. She's the ersatz Lady whose "new religion" [as I've been calling it] has seen to it that *he* never appears in the UCC's THE NEW CENTURY HYMNAL, & *Lord* never in its Psalter. Ersatz: She was invented by three men in the early 19th c. & now, though pseudohistorical, is the metaphysical-historical foundation of the neoreligion I call "Feministicism" [on which see Philip G. Davis, *GODDESS UNMASKED: THE RISE OF NEOPAGAN FEMINIST*

SPIRITUALITY [Spence/99].) Logically, the loss of the (masculine) pronouns erodes the (masculine) divine titles: without "he," "Lord" is less logical, easier to argue against. Psychologically, the loss of "he" reduces to pastels the strong primary colors of the biblical deity &, though claiming gender-balance, tilts toward the "relational"-feminine ("God is love")--a tilt clearly seen in the person & writings of Henri Nouwen (whose advanced studies were in psychology). Politically, the loss of "he" rides the current "rights"-revolutionary egalitarian wave (female suffrage, 1920; feminine cosmic representation [fe/male equality in the godhead], 1965-)...Rhetorically, the pronoun-suppressors claim that their fallback position (to use a military term) is stronger to defend: General Mary Daly & her troops can less effectively taunt with their "God is not male!" battlecry. But we pronoun-supporters believe that the fallback position is weaker, harder to defend: God is less powerful, the proclamation is weaker, & the ground aggressive secularism gains between the frontline & the fallback position concedes the rhetorical advantage to the enemies of the Cross.

6 When secular gender-feminism hit us Christians, we split into **apologists** (defenders of the biblical God, pronouns included) & **apologizers** (conceders, embarrassed at the Bible's exclusive masculinity in God-titles [with a few neuter exceptions, eg "Rock"] & pronouns). We defenders consider the conceders heretics, alienating today & tomorrow from yesterday's consistent affirmation of the Christian language in talking to-&-about God. The Church's response to radical feminism should be to **teach the Faith** in the Faith's language, denouncing the wilful ignorance of the fact that analogies (such as Father/father) are not identicals....Hans Frei is right: inclusive language for God will fade away; but the present controversy over it is unnecessarily rending the Church & weakening its proclamation....A happy note: As the new century begins, Christianity is spreading far more rapidly than it was at the beginning of our century; & the aberrant pronoun-suppressors are not making converts from "the world."

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