

Letter to the Editors

from
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To the Editors:

It's been a long time since J. A. T. Robinson (in *Honest to God*) called on Christians to face more honestly the challenges of modern theology. In response to my asking him the source of his title, he replied: "My wife, at breakfast one morning after she'd read the manuscript." While I liked some of it, I didn't think the book was entirely honest. Some of it seemed to me a sad instance of a good biblical scholar permitting himself to be seduced to modernity.

This letter complains about Christian leaders who have permitted themselves, in their doctrine of God, to be seduced by postmodern femininity. The primary seducer, and *bete noire*, was Mary Daly, in/famous for her conditional sentence: "If (the biblical-canonical) God is male, then males are gods."

Reactions to her "bomb" moved in as many directions as shell-fragments! In this letter, I'll deal with the move which so re-designs the Bible's God as to begin, though unintentionally, a new religion. I refer to the project of de-masculinizing "God," the biblical deity. Promulgators of this project, some of them members of "Confessing Christ," treat Daly's protasis as a condition contrary to fact: God, they say, is not male. They are intimidated by her apodosis, which affirms (on the assumption that the protasis states a fact about the Bible's God), that men are divinely superior to women--the most radical possible affront to the current cultural dogma of the equality of the sexes, a dogma that has achieved sacred status in our secular culture. In this cultural captivity, sacred Scripture loses to sacred egalitarianism.

But what happens if, instead of falling into Daly's neat trap, we accept her protasis? What if the biblical God is indeed "male"? Is the inference she draws in her apodosis necessary (that is, are men necessarily superior to women)? Of course not! But my letter must sharpen down to the question whether we are to be honest to the masculinity of the Bible's God.

1) One of the few continuities (both Testaments, all genre) in the Bible's conceptualization of God, is that all pronominal instances of God-referencing are masculine: God is never "She" or "It." A Yale biblical scholar was shocked when I showed him that in a recent book of his, God was only "It." He admitted that under feminist pressure, he'd censored himself out of the masculine pronouns for God. It was inadvertent and thoughtless, he said. He does not prefer God as impersonal to God as masculine. And he's too good a biblical scholar ever to use a feminine pronoun for God: the Bible is consistently anti-goddess.

to Max Stackhouse, Princeton Theological Seminary

Thanks for your fax last evening....This fax is about a concern of mine that some think trivial--not a trivial concern, which it certainly is not, but a concern about a trivial matter. Do you think it's trivial?

Abp. Wm. Temple: "In its doctrine of the world, Christianity is the most materialistic of the world's religions." It was scandalous to spiritual types! I: "In its doctrine of God, Christianity is the most masculine of the world's religions." It is scandalous to egalitarian types who want their egalitarianism extended upward as transcendentalized politics!

The issue has proved too hot for even the UCC's "Confessing Christ" to handle, though I continue to be hopeful. This letter to the editor is the first public acknowledgement that it even is an issue.

Willis Elliott

2) Those abuse Daly, who say that her "God is male" is just plain wrong. The Bible's God (the canonical God), as "Holy Spirit," at the beginning of the First and Third Gospels, impregnates a woman and is born a human male (biblical religion having no divine-female incarnation). Indeed, of all the world's religions past and present, Christianity is, in its doctrine of God, the most masculine. We Christian leaders have our choice vis-a-vis this fact: we can preach it (as we who are honest to Scripture do), or (embarrassed, scandalized, by it) we can suppress it (for example, by refusing to use the Bible's pronouns for God).

3) Stratagems to soften the biblical God's masculinity range from illuminating to pathetic. It's illuminating to say that this God ontologically transcends sexuality along with all other of our "thoughts" and "ways" (in the acrostic of Isaiah 55:8-9), but this in no way compromises his revelational masculinity (for example, in the consistent use of masculine pronouns for him). That his masculinity is analogical appears in its generic: his masculinity "includes" the feminine, as in the Council of Toledo's "the womb of the Father." But it's pathetic to quote medieval women who refer to Jesus as "Mother": in their contexts, they consistently use masculine pronouns for him (as Julian of Norwich's "Jesus our Mother,...he....").

4) From the Lord's Prayer onward, the Christian name of God is "Father" (full "name," in Matthew 28:19). Tortuous efforts to obscure this fact appear in such United Church of Christ publications as the *Book of Worship* and *The New Century Hymnal*.

The masculinity of the biblical God is, for many liberals, the unacknowledged elephant in the living room of biblical-language usage. We are being asked, even by some in "Confessing Christ," to behave, in our speech and writing, as if the elephant were not there. But the elephant waits patiently. It will not move. And the silliness of walking around it without acknowledging its presence will become more and more apparent.

This silliness is neatly lampooned by a book-reviewer in *First Things* (p. 47, 1.98): "It is as though one were to write: 'Sue is leaving Sue's house across town so that Sue can take Sue's grandmother for a ride in Sue's car.'" That is Gilbert Meilaender's take on this barbarous passage in Norvene Vest's, *Friend of the Soul: A Benedictive Spirituality of Work*, (Cowley/97): "God's word...goes forth from God...God spoke forth creation, and it was so! God's purpose is accomplished by God's very word." This, says the reviewer, is at the compositional level of "Look, Dick, see Spot; Spot can run."

Substance and style both revolt against such barbarity. And laughter, as in this lampoon, may prove to be the cure, as so often it is the cure of sober silliness.

*The Theotokos
has been revealed
on the earth in
truth,*

*Proclaimed
of old by the words
of the prophets,*

*Tre-
told by the wise
patriarchs and the
company of the
righteous.*

*She will
exchange glad
tidings with the
honor of women:*

*Sarah,
Rebecca, and
glorious Hannah,
and Miriam, the
sister of Moses.*

*All the
ends of the earth
shall rejoice with
them, Together with
all of creation.*

*For God shall
come to be born in
the flesh, Granting
the world great
mercy.*

(Orthodox Liturgy)

--JOY IN THE WORD:

A Confessing Christ [UCC] Newsletter

2:1 (Winter/98)