

IS THE BIBLICAL LANGUAGE ABOUT GOD IRREDUCIBLE ?

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ELLIOTT THINKSHEETS

309 L.Eliz.Dr., Craigville, MA 02636

Phone 508.775.8008

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A COMMENTARY on "Biblical, Theological, and Creedal Parameters in Relation to Language About God" (Board of Directors, UCC Penn Southeast Conference, 1989/95)

My answer is YES, the document's implicit answer is NO.

1 I applaud any--including those who struggled together to produce this document--who support the be-kind-to-women movement (which got going a decade after the be-kind-to-blacks movement & a decade before the be-kind-to-gays movement). All be-kind-to movements are subject to two **temptations**: (1) Self-righteous patronism, especially virulent when shame-driven in the interest of redeeming one's sin & restoring one's self-regarding innocence; and (2) Historical revisionism, including the violation of documentary integrity (e.g., the "inclusive language" rewriting of lectionaries & even of the whole Bible) & the imposition of censorship rules (more gently called guidelines, even more gently--& here--called "parameters" [p.1, "reference point"]).

2 The document is guilty of a moral flaw, viz., the concealment (by evasion of mention) of the striking fact that the Bible consistently, in both Testaments, exclusively uses, in speaking about God, the **masculine pronominals** (he, his, him[self]). This, documentarily & historically, is an invariable characteristic of the biblical religions, Judaism & Christianity.

(1) The feministic attempt to **minimize** this fact by slotting it into the "accident" category of antigoddess polemic only defers the issue one remove. One who claims that the masculine pronominality is not of the "substance" of biblical religion (but rather only an accident of sociohistorical contexts), has the burden of proving (a) why, uniquely among rivals, biblical religion rejected female implants into divinity & structured itself on the masculine model (supremely in the incarnation of the god); & (b) that the surrender of this gender exclusivity in the divine would not be a rejection, rather than only a digestible revision, of biblical religion.

(2) The **natural, normal**, and I say the **normative** way of referencing the biblical God by pronouns is masculine. The original UCC Statement of Faith well exhibits this feature of biblical religion: brief though it is, it uses masculine pronominals for God 17 times (+ once for "man")! Subsequent bowdlerizations are at increasing distance from the biblical mode.

(3) In consistently avoiding masculine pronominals for God, the document implicitly accepts radical feminism's claim that "he"-ing God genders him (as in Mary Daly's "If God is male, men are gods"). This is a misunderstanding both of the biblical God & of the anaphoric function of pronouns, whose meaning is not inherent but rather referential. "A pronoun in an analytic language like English receives its total identity from its context, from what it refers to--for this reason theoreticians describe it as *anaphoric*....the pronoun *he* possesses what grammarians call 'notional gender.' Notional gender, in contrast to an arbitrary grammatical gender, is classified according to semantic or meaning-related distinctions, particularly sexual distinctions. The feminists argue that the use of the third person singular 'he' makes God exclusively masculine, but this is to ignore the fact that, since recognition of intent is required for an understanding of pronouns, it is quite possible to use this pronoun in a way that is sexually neutral. This is because anaphoric pronouns do not possess meaning in and of themselves; they take their meaning from what they refer to....the linguist Arey Faltz maintains: '[T]he default-masculinity of English usage makes it easier to apply a masculine word like Father to God, *without* transferring male characteristics than it is to apply Mother without transferring feminine characteristics.'"--pp.249f, Francis Martin, THE FEMINIST QUESTION: Feminist Theology in the Light of Christian Tradition (Eerdmans/94). On the cover, Geo. Lindbeck quoth thus: "The most comprehensive evaluation of Christian feminism so far published....indispensable for those who want to be *au courant* on perhaps the most vital debate in contemporary Christianity." Massively referenced over a wide field of disciplines.

3 The Conference concealed its intention of censorship by the use of the euphemism "reviewing." In fact, the document is to "govern" "all new materials published and/or distributed by the agencies of the...Conference" (p.1). A minor apparatchik with a red pencil could be given such power as to force writers to conform on pain of going unpublished. Geo. Orwell's 1984 "Bureau of Censorship" redivivus. The very atmosphere this created is inimical to, & a betrayal of, the spirit of a liberal church.

4 The document's repeated insistence that God is not male amounts to beating a dead dog: only biblical illiterates & haters of the biblical God would claim that the God of the Bible is male. The issue is not whether God's male but whether, in light of the concreteness of biblical revelation, he's masculine. "The basic intent of the language used by scripture, theology, and creeds" (p.1) is clearly to speak of God as masculine, though the document assumes a nongender hypotext. The deepest objection to the **degendering** of God is that it slips easily into impersonality (as, e.g., Leander Keck's THE CHURCH CONFIDENCE refers to God only as "it," though--when I confronted him on it--he wasn't aware of it).

5 The document confuses metaphor (God as mother, which never occurs in the Bible) with simile, a weaker referral-mode (God as mother-like). Pp.4f says the following OT "father" passages "**refer** to God": 2Sam.7.14; 1Chron.17.23, 22.10, 28.5(should be 6); Ps.68.5, 89.26, 103.13(which is not a metaphor but a simile); Is.9.6, 63.16; Jer.3.19, 31.9; Mal.1.6, 3(should be 2).10. OT "mother" "is used only once in **reference** to God (Isaiah 66:13)." But said passage does not refer to God in the way all but one of the above passages do, viz. as metaphor; it is only a simile: the locutions "refer to" and "reference to" seem to differ only in part of speech, but the speech modes (intimate metaphor, distant simile) are very different: an important distinction the document conveniently obscures. Further, the document alludes to these as signaling the feminine "role": Ps.131.1-2 (which is not a reference to God at all), Hos.11.1-4 (which is gender-neutral, except that the Hebrew once has "his"), & Is.49.15 (which is neither metaphor nor simile, but analogy). (Nor is Is.9.6 a reference to God; a child is given the name "Everlasting Father!")....(The slovenliness of this biblical referencing raises the suspicion that the document is taking something else more seriously than it is taking scripture.)

6 Hard as the document tries, it can find no support in the Bible's use of names for God. "Elah" means "goddess" in modern, but never in biblical, Hebrew. And the construction of the plural of "El" is not (as alleged, p.3) "the plural of the feminine Elah." Yahweh (p.4) "has no sexual overtones, though it does suggest God's authority over and God's care for the people": are those not gender overtones, viz. masculine authority & feminine caring in the one Father-Lord-King God?.....Little in the NT is touched on except Gal.5.22 & 1Cor.12.4-13 (both on the Spirit), & "Jesus' Portrayal of God," which is attenuated thus:

7 Current feminist **relationalism** is the interpretive mold for the document's understanding of the Trinity (p.7): In the Nicene Creed, "the emphasis is not on sexuality but on the relationship of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit." The fact is that that creed addresses neither sexuality nor relationship but rather ontology, being, "of one substance." "Father" (5 times) stitches together the trinitarian (three) sections, & "Son" occurs 3 times (though the document, in recounting this creed, drops this word--an oversight, or intentional?).

The biological male-bonding Father-Son analogy is dessicated into the abstraction "relationship," a portable notion parallel with the document's quasi-Docetic teaching that (p.8) "The fact of his [Jesus'] maleness is incidental to his humanity." Of course it's secondary, for our Lord models for all humanity; but "incidental"? Also quasi-Docetic is this (p.6): "Jesus' revelation of God's nature is not through maleness, but rather through words and deeds."....Finally, the document (p.5) gives the impression that the father metaphor exhausts "Jesus portrayal of God." How about "Lord," a dirty word to radical feminists?

CONCLUSION: The document is too biased, tendentious, to be used in Christian education.