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WHY RESIST THE ANGLO-AMERICAN UPPER-MIDDLE-CLASS PRACTICE OF **BANNING THE BIBLE'S PRONOUNS FOR GOD?**

Occasion: Yesterday a theologically-savvy pastor asked me this question. Yes, I've probably bored most of my Thinksheet readers on the subject; but no Thinksheet has ever addressed this pastoral question, a cry for reasons. Here, then, are two sheet's-worth of reasons. But first a few preliminaries:

1 The only-one-generation-long suppression of the Bible's pronouns for God is a unique phenomenon in the linguistic history of Christianity: never before has any of the nine parts of speech been banned vis-a-vis the deity.

2 Highly intelligent & informed ban-ers defend the banning with arrogant ferocity. One of them, irritated by my confronting him, said to me "Some day I'm going to sit you down & straighten you out about this." Shockingly ill-tempered behavior in a usually well-mannered, polite theologian.

3 Why is this intra-Church issue so volatile, so polarizing? Because only this issue--unlike other agonizing controversies such as abortion & homosexuality--threatens to redesign the biblical deity (linguistic changes being driven by & driving conceptual changes).

1 In his most recent international column, Gorby says that the empire-destroying changes he instituted (let's call it Russian Revolution II) failed to foresee, & adjust for, the ensuing process (in contrast, he said, to a chess master, who must think at least 12 moves ahead). The pronoun ban-ers, too, acted impulsively, failing to think ahead. They acted out of fear, "intimidated" (as Yale biblical scholar Leander Keck put it) by radical feminists. Man-hating (& therefore masculine-God-hating), these rads were coming up with slogans such as "If God is male, men are gods." Note that the protasis of that sentence malevolently & antihistorically reifies a metaphor (transmogrifying God [the metaphoric "Father"] into a man so that the sentence's apodosis can make a surreptious illogical attack on sexism [illogical because the protasis is false, a canard against the whole history of Christian theology]). Mary Daly, the author of that lying sentence, a powerful poet & well-educated ex-RC-nun, knew exactly the linguistic-theological crime she was committing --& did it anyway, to terrifying (theologians-intimidating) effect.

Why didn't the theologians counter-attack? Because, as I've said, they were intimidated. But why intimidated? Because, being in general in favor of the women's movement, they did not want to be (mis)understood, in attacking the distortion, to be attacking the movement. And--a more serious exegetical-theological reason--they did not have a firm offensive-defensive grasp of the gender dimension of the Bible's language for God (the startling fact, in a book so polymorphic in bespeaking the divine, of the Bible's invariable, exclusive use of masculine [never feminine] titles & pronouns for God: with few exceptions [including me], they were unprepared for the attack).

So my first answer to this Thinksheet's title's question is: Resist in prayerful hope of overcoming the mind-less,* craven, short-sighted, shameful surrender, without a fight, to the ban-ers. *This morning I came upon the under-word in the Greek of 1Ti.6.9.

NOTE on that clever, evil metaphor-reifying: This cartoon shows a reversal: not from metaphor-vehicle to fact-tenor (as Mary Daly) but from fact (box #1) to metaphor (box #2, the humor being in the wild inapplicability to box #1). The **former** (the lie "God is male") is an odd, deliberately perverse fundamentalism. (The NYT Magazine yesterday quotes the creator of a current art exhibit: "look for God in the most unusual places....This show is about metaphor and the fundamentalists are literal." In religion, metaphor should be "embraced, not just ground down into stupid right-to-life [& feminist, "God is male"] slogans."

2 *Personal* pronouns for God help fight off post-modernity's depersonalizing, etherializing, of the divine. In his 1978 ('84) Eerdmans book THE CHRISTIAN STORY, Gabriel Fackre put it thus: "As there is no such thing as a person in the abstract, but only one with role and gender, so these come into prominence in talk about God. ...in trinitarian usage, each Person is...personally referred to in the third person by **pronouns** [boldface mine]." Later in the book, p219, he says that some theologians, facing pluralism, have gotten "christological heart failure." Now, facing feminism, some have gotten *theo*logical heart failure. *66

3 *Masculine*-personal pronouns for God help fight off earth-mother, goddess religion. +

Today's revival of goddess worship (as in the "Re-Imagining" movement among liberal-churches women) shows that that competitor with biblical religion was not only yesterday. On this, the usual argument for pronouns-banning, viz, "That was then, this is now"--fails....Sum on §2 & §3: Dropping Christianity's pronouns for God leaves a **vacuum** into which rush both alien "she" (goddess-worship, which the Bible consistently & resoundingly forbids) & alien "it" (the false teaching that God is not personal, in which case all the Bible has to say about God is false). The God-pronouns are food to eat, not dirt to be "cleaned up" (a verbal expression, relative to the whole Christian tradition vis-a-vis gender feminism, in Angela West's DEADLY INNOCENCE: FEMINIST THEOLOGY AND THE MYTHOLOGY OF SIN, Cassels/96, pp195,197 qtd. on p13 of the Summer/97 JOY IN THE WORLD, the UCC "Confessing Christ" periodical): "I began to suspect it might be us [feminists] who would need to clean up our thinking before the faith which these scriptures testify to can make any real sense to us."

4 Maintaining the anti-pronoun taboo requires an exclusive spirit of negative thinking (ironically, in the interest of being inclusive). This sickening treatment of language sickens the soul with cognitive dissonance.

5 Practicing the taboo decreases one's appreciation of great God-mentioning literature in general, not just the Bible. Eg, yesterday in my daily poetry reading I came upon this in W.H.Auden's "Whitsunday in Kirchstetten": "The Holy Ghost / does not abhor a golfer's jargon, / ....but no sacred nonsense can stand **Him** [accent on the last wd., which I've boldfaced]."

6 Abandoning the God-pronouns puts one, & one's followers, on the slippery slope of gender indeterminacy in the divine & opens to the public-media fun-fest of (eg) "God, she or he or whatever." A God-ignorant public becomes an even more God-confused public. And God, the biblical God, is once again made sport of.

7 According to "deep" grammar (eg, Noam Chomsky's "grammar of grammar"), thought moves in (my metaphor) **nine grooves** traditionally called "parts of speech." To put it another way, language's functions are within nine noetic forms. One of these operations is to point to near/far (adj., "this/that"; adv., "here/there"; emphatic & vulgar, "this here" / "that there"--adjs. & advs. overlapping for this function, otherwise diverging). Another is to **refer**: the pronoun is the referential part of speech. In psycholinguistics, what happens when a dissonance is set up between deep grammar (the function) & shallow grammar (the form appearing as speech)? The possibilities: (1) Laughter, for the humorist has deliberately eliminated a groove or jumped a groove; (2) Puzzlement (as to what is going on); (3) Intellectual/emotional confusion; (4) Anger that for some reason, one has been "had"; (5) Sympathy toward the person who "just doesn't know how to say it"; (6) Esoteric pleasure from being in the "know" on this & sharing the speaker/writer's spin (deliberate distortion, for some effect believed beneficial).

What is cultural-linguistically certain is that no groove-banning or groove-jumping deliberate distortion can long survive: the "deep" substructural grammar waits patiently for the surface disturbance to run its course. The surface rules, change as they may, are subject to the deep rules.

Now, it's a deep rule that when a subject (say, "God") has been mentioned, any subequent reference to it must use the referential-pronominal groove--eg, when the subject is "God," "God" cannot be used to refer to the subject, the subject-word being functionally nonreferential. "God...God...God" is a false replacement for "God...he...he." To deep grammar, the former feels like three deities or an instance of rhetorical intensification ("god...God...GOD!"). The replacement intention cannot long endure, for the surface is feeble in fighting against the depth. If you find that hard to grasp, let's put it this way: The pronoun-replacer is not asking you to replace all pronouns but only the till-now "always & everywhere" (among Jews & Christians) pronouns for only one subject, viz, God (&, among truly extreme & docetic feminists, Jesus). That one-subject exception to honoring the pronominal groove is linguistically weird, odd, idiosyncratic, soon laughable, then soon gone. My heart aches that so many otherwise intelligent people have let themselves be duped by the linguistically naive, God-pronoun-banning, fraud.

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8 Pronouns are made **reflexive** by adding "-self"--eg, "God himself." But so great is the gender-feminist hatred of "him" that it is elided, leaving the linguistic monstrosity (two-groove mix of noun & pronoun) "Godself," a construct one would laugh at were it in a farce. It is linguistically farcical, so we should laugh when we hear it & maybe even boo--as gender feminists booed not many years ago & so by intimidation "cured" liberal speakers from using Christianity's pronouns for God. Why no booing at "Godself"? (1) Women, esp. "middle-class" women, are socialized against public ridiculing; (2) "Middle-class" men are socialized against public ridiculing of women & of men who imagine themselves to be, in their speech-habits, defending women. Indeed, the breeding of such men includes instant defense of women & what seem to be women's causes; it's the middle-class nonviolent version of the macho which in lower-class men is violent. Men so bred mindlessly attack any men whom they think are attacking women verbally or physically. (For my defense of our religion's pronouns for God, I've taken more verbal abuse from middle-class men than from any class of women.) Conclusion: In the American middle class, relations between the sexes are so chaotic as to slant the word-playing field against honoring the Bible's pronouns for God. Have faith: My coal-mine canary is gasping but not dying, & some fresh breezes of reason & devotion are beginning to blow into the darkness.

9 The false theo-logic behind the pronoun banning goes like this: (1) God created men & women equal (an idea mixing religion [biblical mutuality & "in Christ" equality] with politics [the ontological & political overreading of "created equal" as egalitarianism]); (2) That being true, feminine & masculine must be equal in deity, the Creator-Source of that earthly equality: heaven & earth here should "reflect" each other; (3) To the extent that the Bible does not reflect this co-reflectance, its doctrine of God is defective & (4) must be corrected; (5) The correction requires reducing the biblical text's divine masculinity (beginning with banning the pronouns for God) & increasing its divine femininity; (6) Since this balance goal strives to convey how things actually stand in God, those who resist the means (eg, pronoun banning) to that end are fighting against truth & God; (7) Since the aim is to liberate God from androcentrism-patriarchalism & thus to liberate the Church from error, serious efforts to **re-form** the doctrine of God must include disciplining those who preach the old God-distorting imbalance.

PROBLEM: Those who experience the disciplining call it censorious, oppressive, illiberal. The speech codes in some liberal seminaries forbid the use of the Bible's God-pronouns. (A young relative of mine, when she got back her first paper in seminary, noted that all pronouns for God were crossed out & the paper had no grade. Complaining, she was told that no paper with God-pronouns would receive a grade. When she asked whether graded papers were a graduation requirement, she was told yes. Catch-22, liberal seminary version!) If the student suppresses the pronouns till after graduation, will the judicatories block access to pastorates? The incubus is heavy upon the liberal-church land. Pastors have told me that their consciences hurt because they're going along (with the ban) to get along in their career even though they believe the ban is wrong & the **pronoun police** have added another layer of wrong. IRONY: Oppression in the interest of liberation! (Heretics burned at the stake would save their souls, said some Inquisitorial rationalizers in claiming that thus the execution was an act of love.)

The twisted thinking of these self-righteous pronoun police puts me in mind of this, from the great Jewish USSupreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis: "Experience should teach us to be most on our guard to protect liberty when the government's purposes are beneficial. Men born to freedom are naturally alert to repel invasions of their liberty by evil-minded rulers. The greater danger to liberty lurks in incidious encroachments by men of zeal, well-meaning but without understanding." From such zealots we can expect, & get, highhanded effort at **social control**. In 1992, the Roman Catholic Church discontinued its Index Expurgatorius (listing of banned books); three years later, using Letty Russell's hit list of banned masculine words (including the God-pronouns), the UCC published THE NEW CENTURY HYMNAL, which specifically aims at social control of what UCCers sing (& therefore think & teach & preach & write). This Babylonian Captivity of language cannot be passed off as a small adjustment to cultural change: it is a heretical revolution. +

10 Banning the God-pronouns is just one more sad, futile try at removing the Bible's **scandal of particularity.** In his THE HIDDEN FACE OF GOD, Rich. Elliott Friedman does this by claiming that the Hebrew Scriptures show a progressive occultation from anthropomorphism to abstraction. (The pronounless deity is not yet an abstraction but is on the way.) He finds the personal God an embarrassment--as the pronoun police find embarrassing the fact that the Bible's God-pronouns are always, with not even one exception, masculine (as are all God-titles except the few neuters [eg, "my Rock"]). Egalitarians can create a more user-friendly deity by reducing the totally masculine titles-&-pronouns & adding some feminine titles-&-pronouns. Some of them have done so. But the surgery, excisive & plastic, is so radical that the result is a different deity, thus a new religion. (Christianity is the worst religion for such surgery. Among the world's religion, it only has its deity visiting earth in only the form of a man, a male human being. Christian thought has never emphasized that fact; the latest women's movement has aimed the spotlight at it.)

11 Suppressing the God-pronouns has a depressing effect on speaking of God. To avoid the artifice & strain of avoiding the masculine pronouns, one is tempted not to speak of God, or to do so only by indirection/circumlocution. This, in addition to all the secular pressures to avoid God-talk, including the fact that almost all of America's children are intellectually formed in no-God-talk institutions, viz, the public schools. Further: Even if one does speak pronounlessly of God, the effort to do so (including the fight against deep grammar) takes attention away from God & one's message: the crippled medium cripples the message. So much for encoding: a similar strain occurs in the decoders (listeners/readers), whose attention is diverted from the message (& from God) to the crippled medium. The devil loves the mess at both ends: the whole thing was her (or "his," if you prefer the traditional gender) idea. ("Her": The goddess alive, well, & hard at work.)

12 Banning the God-pronouns leaves the God-nouns (King, Lord, Father, Son, et al) open to wholesale/piecemeal attack by female & male gender feminists. To say it the other way around: The God-pronouns offer a defense (negative & positive) for the God-titles.

13 We ecumenists argue that verbal novelties (banning the God-pronouns, using euphemisms for "Father" & "Son" in naming the Trinity, reducing or eliminating "Lord," making up feminine titles) alienate the innovators from the Bible, the Great Tradition, & "the Church throughout the world." Sectarians care more for their language revolution than for all it alienates them from. 1Jn.2.19 CEV: "If they had been part of us, they would have stayed with us."

14 What will happen to the sectarians' children & children's children? The false word-trajectories will lead them ever further from the "one, holy, catholic & apostolic Church."

15 The churches' ordination vows include something like this: "I promise to deal honorably & faithfully with the Holy Scriptures of the Old & New Testaments." The language revisionists are in violation of this vow. It's serious: Christians do not have a land or a nation; what we have is a book, the Book "which gives a light to every age, / It gives but borrows none." To feminists we should say "I feel your pain"; to gender feminists we should say "No tampering with Basic Christian, the language of our Faith in & since the Bible."

16 Retrieval-restorationist movements now afoot in Protestant denominations to "Restore the Center!" should not have to fight, within their ranks, the linguistic-sectarian cultural accomodationists. We are now in a world word-struggle (logomachy) for the human soul, & our Christian language must be (as Craigville Colloquy XV's title put it) "faithful & powerful." Language is a culture's most change-resistant dimension: shall we fight our language, or fight *with* it, counter-intuitive to the world's idolatries of money, celebrity, sexuality, power, consumption, equality?

Banning the God-pronouns digs a low hole through the dike of the Christian Language. A better, & faithful, way to go (in a later Thinksheet): defending the Christian Language's masculine (never feminine) God-titles & God-pronouns.