

In church today we sang "...sing to the Lord....him serve....his praise....come ye before him and rejoice!" It's the first hymn in hundreds of hymnals, including the one used in Yale U. chapel (A NEW HYMNAL FOR COLLEGES AND SCHOOLS [Yale U.P./92], an update of the 1956 hymnal).

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SHOULD WE CONTINUE THE CANONICAL-BIBLICAL PRACTICE OF ALWAYS USING, FOR GOD, **MASCULINE PRONOMINALS**, NEVER FEMININE?

This is the priormost question in the "inclusive language" debate.

OCCASION: The planning committee for Craigville Theological Colloquy XII is drifting toward choosing, as theme, something like "With what language, now, shall we speak about God?" It makes me nervous. Maybe writing a Thinksheet at it will calm my nerves.

1 Please forgive one more reference to what the dying Gertrude Stein said when her longtime partner Alice B. Toklas asked "What is the answer?" GS: **"What is the question?"** Here are some less-than-priormost questions that fail to go to the heart of the matter: Shall we convert biblical feminine similes for God (e.g., "like a mother") to titles (here, "Mother")? Shall we strive to balance masc. & fem. reff., thus correcting the Bible's God-masculinity? In baptizing, shall we substitute other words for "Father" & "Son," or shall we use but supplement those? Shall we eliminate the masculine divine titles ("Lord," "King," "Father," "Son," et al)? Shall we leave untouched the biblical language for God except for eliminating the masculine pronominals (pronouns [he, him, himself] & the pronominal adjective [his])? Or shall we surrender consistency, & just try to be more "sensitive" to the problem, self-censoring in the interest of gender justice?

2 Let's look at the underlinings in the sentence immediately above:

....sensitive I got from the Preface of the above new (1992) hymnal, which claims to be "sensitive to the need for a more inclusive language of praise." Yet its very first hymn has "Lord" three times, & masculine pronominals for God a dozen times! And not only in English! The full text is printed also in French, German, Italian, Swahili, Indonesian, & Japanese! A pile-up of **non**-inclusive pronominalism.

....self-censoring against the masculine pronominals for God is so stressed in my own denomination that many of our religious leaders, clergy & even laity, have perfected the tabu. Feminist counters, mostly feminine, have for some years reported to preachers "at the door" after worship as to the number of violations. My own pastor hasn't slipped for years. But today I heard a clergywoman slip: she said "his" & swiftly changed to "God's."....Social censoring among the leaders has speeded the denominational process: leaders punish the slip-pers, often with humor, a powerful weapon. Note here the psycho-multiplier effect: A leader who's working hard at self-censorship is supersensitive to other sinners, & as a self-strengthening strategam pounces on them. Those who refuse to play this game--I, e.g.--are treated as "out of it" archaizers. The UCC national leaders, & many at lower levels, are intolerant of any who would answer "yes" to this Thinksheet's title-question, or--worse--tolerate us.

....gender justice is the ethical sanction used as incentive to eliminating the Bible's masculine pronominals for God: females are said to be unincluded, & consequently offended, by the canonical-biblical dogma. (And dogma it is, as in this Thinksheet's title's "always" & "never.") But why did no woman (but only a man, one man) raise the question when the original UCC Statement of Faith committee did its work (the original having 21 masculine pronominals for God!)? Because Betty Friedan had not yet come out with THE FEMININE MYSTIQUE. The heresy-hunting impulse came not from the church but from the secular consciousness of a woman embittered by the fact that her husband got to finish his PhD & she didn't get to finish hers (as she says in the preface). But at that time, liberal churches were impressed by Colin Williams' phrase "The world sets the agenda [for the church]."

This gender-justice attitude is so UCC/PC (politically correct in my denomination) that in a recent UCC gathering, I heard gasps when a speaker referred to the resurrected Jesus as "he": supposedly, he was resurrected not only desexized but also demasculinized. A zombie or something. These modern-day resurrectional

docetists claim that what was resurrected was not the (masculine) "Jesus" but only the (genderless) "Christ." The Incarnation's scandal of particularity overwhelmed by the claim of human generality, a doctrine easily merging with New Age thinking. Feminism's impact on Christianity is not just linguistic but, increasingly, theological.

3 In our garden recently, parents (two physicians) were instructing their small chn. vis-a-vis in/edibles: "This is OK to eat, but not these black berries on the red stems." For at least 4,000 years, our spiritual heritage has been eating its way through new cultures variously encountered & has had to make innumerable food/poison decisions. Now, for our Christian faith & future, is feminism food or poison? "Food" says the left (radical feminism), "poison" say the right (fundamentalism). "Depends," say I. Consciousness-raising about historic & contemporary sexism is food; documentary revisionism (rewriting the Bible to one's present specs) is poison: adopting non-masculine-pronominalism is poison. Here's the poisonous thinking:

- A God is genderless.
- B The Bible's God is gendered--consistently masculine.
- C The Bible must be rewritten to express the reality of God's genderlessness.
Or at least
- D we must speak of God genderlessly, without masculine pronominals.

4 A is a philosophical position perhaps at odds with Gn.1.27 NRSV, which says that "he" created us "male and female" (Heb. implies "he"): God, if "male and female" reflects his "image," is not genderless but bi-gendered; but God is masculine gender if "male and female" is an additional statement not descriptive of "image." In either case, what is ruled out in this crucial passage is the notion that God is genderless, precisely the premise of position A, a position defensible neither biblically nor theologically but only philosophically. A delivers from biblical religion's scandal of particularity, at the cost of poisoning biblical religion--or, to move us beyond the nutrition metaphor, eliminating biblical religion.

B is a statement of fact.

C is a statement of intention to defeat the fact stated in B. This defeat has been completed: the "inclusive language Bible," in various versions, is in print & purchasable.

D is the scrupulosity (pathological sense) now afflicting much of my denomination's leadership. One baleful effect is that it greatly increases the difficulty of teaching the children to speak God-talk; it's almost as bad as trying to complete your performance after a string has snapped on your violin.

An imperialist presupposition of position D is that the specific-particular-biblical God can be reconfigured to match modernity's & post-modernity's God-idea--as though Christianity were the religion that can give up its specificity without losing its soul & so itself (psycho-philosophically similar to Hinduism's mutation into Buddhism). Every religion has its embarrassments. Ours are creation, the incarnation, the atonement, Jesus' resurrection & return, the Trinity, & the divine masculinity. In the UCC, various members have jettisoned various of these embarrassments. Most, I think, have given up literal faith in the one story in which God as Spirit is not only gendered but also sexed, viz. the impregnation of a human female (Mt.1.18, L.1.35). But that birth-story is peripheral & alluded to nowhere else in the NT; all items on the embarrassments list are central to the main biblical-Christian Story in its hair-&-skin, in its down-to-earth & up-to-heaven, **concreteness**. As another stanza of the hymn quoted in the pre-title of this Thinksheet has it, "Without our aid **he** did us make; we are **his** flock, **he** doth us feed, And for **his** sheep **he** doth us take."

5 Says Howard Zinn in his new book, DECLARATIONS OF INDEPENDENCE, people adopt the ideas that are less likely to get them into trouble. In the UCC, anti-masculine-pronominalism has spread like a wildfire chiefly from clergy fear that unless they "go along," they won't "get along" (get another church), or at least certainly won't "get ahead." What yielding to this terrorism does to the soul is not pretty to behold. Instead of being **reflective** & courageous, they become **reflexive** & wary.

6 How do so many get led **outside** the biblical Faith? By myopically taking one step at a time, as last summer a skunk by following a peanut trail I laid down got out of my study & then out of the house.