

IS THERE A "THEOLOGICAL STANDARD" FOR GOD'S CHARACTER?

Craigville Theological Colloquy X.8

An Open Letter to a New York pastor who, into my ears Sunday, preached
"Mother God" as a Mother's Day (erstwhile Festival of the Christian Home) sermon

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ELLIOTT THINKSHEETS

309 L.Eliz.Dr., Craigville, MA 02636
Phone 508.775.8008
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Dear _____:

Loree & I were glad to be with you & your people Sunday, & I hope you'll take with good grace some comments on your sermon, which had excellent communication qualities, unfortunately. No doubt I'd often be happy about those qualities in your sermons from time to time. But on this occasion I did not like the God you were promoting....Let me come at this from several directions. I would of course welcome any rejoinders.

1 The enclosed flier of the upcoming colloquy, which we'd be delighted to have you participate in, shows the general concern--"Theological Standards for Ministry in the United Church of Christ"--of which this Thinksheet's concern is a particular instance, viz God's character as a theological standard for UCC ordination & commissioning. Because a recent ordination candidate's God was **the Great Lover** in the Cosmic Process, I could not vote to ordain him. So I could not have voted to ordain you if, at the time, you were preaching, as you were Sunday, this strange God. This God who's to be loved but not feared...who promises but does not threaten...who rewards but does not punish...who comforts but does not castigate...whose lap we can always crawl up into, as you your mother's when you were a small boy. (God the Great Lap? After worship, I heard several of your folk say they found the analogy "helpful" & "comforting.")

2 The religion you preached was so **privatized** that I should not have been surprised at the entire absence of the out-there world. No word on Bosnia, which was--wasn't it?--on everyone's mind, Clinton threatening immediate military action. No word about the 21 children sent out of David Koresh's Mt. Carmel Compound, or about the millions of America's children who have no such mother as you had to extrapolate "Mother God" from. No action suggestions to your parishioners. Your God is a Lover, yes, but is that all? is that enough? only a soft side (so no prophetic denunciation & call to repentance)? Doubtless you would tell me that you take care of these matters in other sermons. But could I believe that when in this sermon there were not even glimmers of the hard side of God?

3speaking of David Koresh, he was both soft (loving) & hard (disciplining) of the Branch Davidian children. After work with the 21 children who survived, the chief psychiatrist said that what impressed him most was the deep bonding between them & Koresh, deep because they both **feared** & **loved** him. "Would the bonding not have been even deeper if they only loved him?" asked CNN's Sonya. The answer: "Not as deep."....Unlike your soft God, the biblical God in both Testaments is to be both feared & loved. And how deep, in exemplary Jewish & Christian personages in & beyond the Bible, is the bonding with God! In the Bible, God loves, teaches-legislates, & enforces the rules--according to a Ford Foundation study in the '70s, the three human essentials transcending social setting. The full range of emotional responses to these parental activities includes fear. Of course it could be said that the parental analogy for the divine is pertinent only on the positive-affirmative side: even if the child needs the fear response to the parent, we do not need--indeed, should not have--that response to God. Countering that is the oft-heard comment that such a God is Grandparent, not Parent. If we read the analogy in the reverse direction, we get the question what happens to a child who has no fear of parents, of authorities? That's one definition of the anomic personality, the criminologist's nightmare. Can there be no correlation between the society's permissiveness & the steady rise of anomie? Between the public-schools establishment's non-use of fear, & chaos (& consequent non-learning) in the classroom?

4 Good sermons, doubtless you were taught at Princeton Seminary, are mixes of the **timeless** with the **timely**--yes, I feel the need of saying more of what I said

in §2. A classic instance is Luther's 1522 Wittenberg sermons--preached at the request of the city government!--combining the eternal truths of the Reformation and the temporal needs of civil life. We can expect more good preaching from Pres. Clinton now that he's become aware his ship of specifics won't float except on a sea of faith. Your sermon seemed to assume that dealing with temporal specifics is unnecessary, since everything floats on a timeless sea of **love**. Accordingly, the god you derived from your Jn.14 text was only the Unconditional Lover rather than also the Ultimate **Higher Power** having to make the tough calls in history & the cosmos. The scandal of particularity replaced by the scandal of generality. (Am I judging too harshly? Many preachers experience softening of the brain on Mother's Day, sounding the way Bernie Siegel & Leo Bascaglia sound every day in the year.) Specifically, when you got to "No one comes to the Father except through me" (vs.6), your love-filter thought a simple denial sufficient (so you'd probably filter "may not perish" out of 3.16).

5 Being $1\frac{1}{2}$ generations older than you, I need to listen to you, encouraging you where I agree & complaining where I can't. I must complain of your cohort's **fear of fear**. God & parents, according to your doctrine, are to be loved but not feared. Y'all have taken over public education, so children don't fear (& therefore don't "mind") their teachers. We're just beginning to get psychosocial analyses of the personal & societal effects of the failure to teach children to fear sex, which is for humanity the most fearsome force on earth.

Underneath this rejection of the fear sanction is the doctrinaire rejection of the vertical (**hierarchical**), the flipside of which is the affirmation of the horizontal (partnership). Typical of this attitude are the rising attacks on the "Higher Power" aspect of the Twelve Steps of AA & spinoffs.

Dynamically, the essence of the higher-power idea is the imposing of an alien will, ie a will other than the self's. But curiously, what is rejected in psychology & religion is affirmed politically: you agree that a higher power, viz the Allies, should have imposed it's will on Germany (for one thing, stopping the Holocaust) --& did so successfully. Most of you agree that a higher power, viz the U.N., should impose it's will on Yugoslavia. It's the way of empire, the way of the world. One king wrests sovereignty from other kings, to become "High King" (in the case of Ireland) or "King of Kings" (in the case of the ancient Near East).

Now, the biblical God is **Creator-Controller-Restorer** of the cosmic & historical order, imposing his (sic) will, which includes our (severely limited) freedoms. Some avoid the "higher" (vertical) aspect by absorbing God into the cosmic process (thus, process theology). Some affirm "Creator," as amenable to love, but reject "Controller" (as seeming to coerce rather than persuade) & "Restorer" (as judging & sentencing [punishing], the governmental functions to restore social order). Some reject all three, reject theism as violating the law of parsimony: is not belief in love, that love is god, sufficient? With the Bible, I affirm all three. Do you? Please refer to this Thinksheet's title: I'm defending, as a theological standard, the biblical understanding of God's character.

6 In the ¶ immediately above, I spoke of God "imposing his (sic) will." The model here is the male, with his superior musculature, imposing his will on the female. You & I so loathe the sexism of male chauvinism that it's tough to clean up the model enough for transcendentalized use, ie to speak of God's imposing his will. But suppose we do try to clean it up instead of simply rejecting it, & with it the idea of God as masculine. E.g., let's say the husband is constitutive of the home & the wife-mother is definitive of it: the roles are equal but different. Transcendentalized (verticalized), this view sees the divine initiative, God in creating-controlling-restoring, as masculine (& thus to be addressed as he-his-him, God [not God-goddess], Creator [not Creatrix], Lord [not Lady], King [not Queen])--but God's central-definitive motivation, love, as feminine (& so God as pregnant woman [Is 42.14], mother [Is.66.13], midwife [Ps.22.9], brood hen [L.13.31-35]). As for your sermon title, "Mother God," that implies that "Mother" as designating God should have equal standing with "Father," as an extrapolation from our current sexual politics. But this leveling applied to God violates Judaism, Christianity, & the Bible.

To illustrate how foreign to Scripture this revisionism is, I'll stay with your sermon's Gospel, John. Vv.7-15, chap.16's section on the Holy Spirit, does extensively what you didn't do at all in your sermon, viz use the pronominals vis-a-vis God. Pathetically, some feminist hermeneuts claim the Holy Spirit as feminine on the basis of the Hebrew word (though the Greek word is neuter; & the Latin, masculine). But in this section, the Spirit in NRSV is 11 times masculine pronominal (& never "she-hers-her" or "it"): **he**, 8; **his**, 1; **him**, 1. The Greek behind "Advocate" is masculine, & the Greek phrase behind "Spirit"--viz, "that [masc.] one, the Spirit"--is masculine. Now look up the passage in any "inclusive language" "translation" & see what lexical crimes are committed in submitting to political correctness! Now check out some favorite hymns in a few "inclusive language" hymnals & see what barbarisms are suffered from the need to avoid, in singing God, the masculine pronominals!....It isn't just that it's a lost cause, the Bible's God being overwhelmingly masculine & antigoddess. It's that also, the taboo against masculine words for God alienates God's people from the Bible, which is experienced as a prefeminist (& therefore inferior) book. Check out a few VISN programs & you'll find the language for God almost exclusively biblical, non"inclusive."....Please return to "he-his-him," & use "God-Creator-Father-Son-Lord-King" without embarrassment.

7 Another influence against the full & vigorous use of masculine terminology for God is liberal religion's attack on "the system" (as all complexions of the left have been calling it since WWII, especially under the impetus of the '60s). The most systematic expression of this point of view to date is Walter Wink's trilogy on "the powers." In volume three, ENGAGING THE POWERS (Fortress/92, p.18), he misrepresents me by putting me in the context of his rejecting "the heavenly combat myth" behind television's salvation-by-hero: In Thinksheet #2196 (8 Nov 87), "Willis Elliott's observation underscores the seriousness of this [television] entertainment [which the Thinksheet never mentions!]: 'Cosmogony (the birth of the cosmos) is egogony (the birth of the individual person): you are being birthed through how you see 'all things' as being birthed.' Therefore, 'Whoever controls the cosmogony controls the children.'" I agree with Walter that (in my words) Jesus reverses the lord/servant relationship (M.10.42-45, which however preserves the vertical, is not egalitarian in form though may well be so in function). But my contexts were (1) the abuse of religion by displaying its difficulties as television entertainment & (2) the dominance, in our public schools, of a godless cosmogony (world-origin story), viz evolutionism. Walter, a Methodist, wrongly (I think) applies the way of "the kingdom" to the dis/orders of the world, a confusion reminding me of the old modernist phrase "building the kingdom [of God]." I on the contrary accept the biblical vision of Kingdom Come by direct divine action, God's will being "done on earth as it is in heaven." These two eschatologies subtend two quite different personal & political modes with many variations within each. Walter's style I'd call modernist-activist, mine is evangelical-activist. We love each other & spark each other....Your style? It seemed to me to be modernist-quietist, but it's precarious to judge from one sermon.

8 An even stronger, & not unrelated, impulse against the use of masculine words (nouns & pronominals) for God is the feminist/womanist movement. (I can't call it anti-"sexism" [1965-70 "on the model of 'racism,'" says RHD2], for it's steadily becoming pro-female sexist--just as I can't any longer use "racism" only for oppressive white attitudes toward nonwhites.) As I'm preparing to teach a summer course in hymnody, I'm acutely aware of the movement's increasing success in the writing of hymns (almost entirely a +, I believe) & in the rewriting of hymns (generally a bowdlerizing disaster)....Checking out many recent hymnals, I find more hymns by **Brian Wren** than by any other living hymnist--so I'll take him as negative example of "inclusive language" (though I like a number of his hymns & hope they survive the rigorous competition for placement in tomorrow's hymnals). (1) Having arranged a stack of his books chronologically, I find a steady decrease in the use of masculines for God. (2) You must love Wren, especially the late Wren. A line in your sermon--"God does not have to threaten anyone, because what God offers is so wonderful"--is Wrenish, accentuating the positive & virtually

eliminating the negative. (3) While genetic engineering is mucking around with the gene pool, it's not eliminating genes; but the imaginal engineering of the late Wren is diminishing the biblical image-pool, in tune with the left wing of the feminist/womanist movement. For me, it's a theological standard that that image-pool is canonical on the negative side (ie, not to be *subtracted* from) though not on the positive side (so it's OK to *add* to the church's image-pool). Where the Heidelberg Catechism (AD/CE 1563) says "God may not and cannot be imagined in any way," it's being implicitly negative-canonical & explicitly positive-canonical, a severer stance than mine, but possibly a wiser one. (4) In BRING MANY NAMES (Hope/89), Intro., B.W. well expresses a half truth: "Hymns are sung to God, I believe, *from where we are*, and knowing who, what, and where we are in terms of our gender, age, culture and class is fundamental for hymnwriters and worship-leaders....'Ablebodied,' Main Line, First World White *men* need the biggest ears, because we have to listen to everyone. (PS: Dumbo had big ears and learned to fly.)" The other half of this truth is that we need to be taught to sing hymns to God *from where we've been* (collective "we," we Christians through the ages)--as those applying for U.S. citizenship need to learn who they now are (their new identity under a new flag, regardless of their gender-age-culture-class identities). (Until this week, the American identity included English as the implicitly official language.) Wren's principle would enclavize the church.

9 You, I think, would agree with Wren's **false antithesis** between control (vertical, hierarchical, patriarchal, monarchical) & love (horizontal, alongsided, egalitarian, democratic). Here & there in his writings he uses his neologism MAWKI ("masculinity as we have known it") to denigrate control. In WHAT LANGUAGE SHALL I BORROW?...A MALE RESPONSE TO FEMINIST THEOLOGY (Crossroad/89), God's character loses control: God is love, which as seen in Jesus is unconditional & uncontrolling &, of course, noncoercive (even in the eschaton, the end of HAWKI [my trope on him: "history as we have known it"]). So (p.54) he cannot abide "He, King, Shepherd, Lord, Father" (&, elsewhere, "Son"). In a word, a new word of his, no KINGAFAP (G-d as King, Almighty Father, and Protector--p.119). Indeed, he rejects the story-line of the early Christian creed & the classic hymns, a story-line that's intensely vertical (Father sends Son DOWN, Son serves Father, Son goes back UP & will come DOWN again). P.124: God is not "mon-arch, at the top of the cosmic pyramid" + "the descent of the Prince - Son of God...as the ...surrender of kingship and control."

10 God's character being thus emasculated (ie, deMAWKIzed), the atonement is demoted to moral-influence-only, an instance of the "pathetic" fallacy in reverse, we being invested with a persuasive-salvific pathos upon contemplating his suffering (as the PB puts it) "for us and our salvation." The biblical-classical rich metaphoric nexus for contemplating our Lord's crucifixion-resurrection is surrendered in the interest of being PC gender-wise! (B.W. is a Brit, United Reformed, formerly Congregational. On this side of the Atlantic, we associate his point of view with an Am. Congregationalist, Horace Bushnell, more than 1½ cs. ago.)

11 The virus of feminist linguistic revisionism has reached the World Council of Churches. Today I participated in a liturgy that included a WCC-published litany providing the options of "his [God's]" twice, "his [the]" once, & "Father's [Creator's]" once--the leader messing up his choices as he went. The substitution of "Creator" for "Father" is ignorant ("Creator" also being masc.) & heretical (excluding Son & Spirit from creation). B.W., too, radically attacks the Trinity, with a variety of verbiage to avoid "Father" & "Son." We have here a major threat to trinitarian doctrine, as can be seen by the presence of 14 B.W. hymns (vs. only 12 Isaac Watts!) in the Yale Chapel A NEW HYMNAL FOR COLLEGES AND SCHOOLS (Yale U.P./92). No use of "alt." when texts have been altered, & (Preface) "masculine references have been significantly reduced" (though still some use of Father, Lord, & King). In four books of B.W.'s hymns I found no instance of Father-Son-Spirit & seven replacements for the classic trinitarian terminology, none of them using either Father or Son....Luther said hymnody is the best way of teaching doctrine. B.W. is a gifted hymnist, but his doctrine is heretical--as, I fear, yours is, my dear brother preacher.