

GOD-PICTURES IN THE WORLD'S SCRIPTURES

A wide-angle lens on the current language-for-God debate

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ELLIOTT THINKSHEETS
309 L.Ellz.Dr., Craigville, MA 02636
Phone/Fax 508.775.8008
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The first- & bottom-line question in the **hermeneutics** of sacred texts is this:

What is the nature of the deity/deities (or ultimate principle) this text was written to serve?....In teaching (at the U. of Hawaii & elsewhere) the world's religions, I asked my students to read selected passages from the world's bibles with this question uppermost in mind....In this Thinksheet, I'm asking you to think through our Bible with that question uppermost in *your* mind. It's hardest to do with your own scripture (Scripture): your own personal-&-corporate hermeneutical-theological habits (including prejudices & taboos) fight against your seeing the text itself, the text in itself, letting it speak to you without the intervention of pre-judgments.

1 Did I lose you already? Some devotees (in our & other religions) claim that their religion is incomparable, so my proposed project is invalid, illegitimate, perhaps even blasphemous. This point of view is, as I see it, primitive (bad sense) even when elaborately espoused by eminent intellectuals. And it misfits for life on this shrinking globe. As misfitting, it is impious, im-pious.

2 The comparable is the relative (in contrast to the absolute) & the specific (in contrast to the generic, the semantic domain or category). God has given the human mind the power of self-distancing, of suspension of commitment. **Theologically**, I see my (biblical) God, by "revelation," as the (only) One, the Absolute, incomparable as transcending both relativity (except as true in contrast to his competition, the "idols") & category (as One is an insufficient number to constitute a category or genus). **Philosophically**, however, as I try to worship God with all my "mind," I see God, my God, in a pantheon of competing divine options all of which more or less claim privileged-"revelational" status, all related ("relative") to each polemically on equal terms (ie, none having a leg up on any other)--the specifics of each competitor being under judgment of the generic category (the generic "god" judging the specific "my God").

3 Contiguous disciplines such as history & philosophy of religion are necessary critics of & aids to theology, & the philosophical/theological *mental* distinction cannot be *existentially* maintained. But I'm calling for a **sustained awareness** of the contiguous disciplines as theologians do their intracommunal (tribe-sustaining) work, & at the same time a **sustained resistance** to the temptation to reduce the theological under pressures from the publicly-more-acceptable philosophical--in particular, the temptation so to qualify one's own God-picture that it fades into an abstraction.

4 Since 1930, when I rejected Darwinian pressure to fade the biblical God out into "natural selection," I have experienced numerous fade-out pressures against the biblical God. Marxism. Nazism. Process theology. Now, conservative gender feminism (which wants to keep God as personal but fade out the masculine-personal specific in Christianity's God-picture; radical gender feminism reverses the gender).

Every such fade-out either attacks or erodes the biblical **personal**-God-picture, now under massive assault from its impersonal rivals, esp. Buddhism.

5 No substitute for reading the world's scriptures for their God-pictures, but next best is using subject-indexes & concordances of them (eg, 100s of such references in the Gita concordance, where a few minutes will show that Hindu classic's straddle of God as im/personal). Then of course one can explore the contents & indexes of expositions of the scriptures (eg, this on the Gita **straddle** [A.C.Bouquet, SACRED BOOKS OF THE WORLD, Penguin/54/55] 229): "The Gita...marks the establishment of a kind of permanent compromise between those Indians who desired to retain the belief in a Personal God who could be an adored Friend, and those who still held to the higher Brahminism with its conception of an Impersonal and all-pervading Absolute--a compromise which has endured to the present day." The reverse is happening in liberal Protestantism: in many mainline church members, the experience & conviction of God as personal has faded into a deism little different from an impersonal It (& no longer a He). The gender feminist suppression of the Bible's (only masculine) pronouns for God is unwittingly complicitous with this trend &, to that extent & for that reason, unfaithful to the Bible.

6 The burden of proof (of necessity & of efficacy) lies with those who **suppress**

sacred texts or portions or dimensions thereof. Marcion & Hitler's Alfred Rosenberg suppressed the OT, for transparent reasons. Some now suppress the Bible's (masculine) pronouns for God, dropping that dimension for equally transparent reasons---this dimension of Scripture being considered, under feminist attack, of the husk rather than of the kernel of God's self-revelation (ie, how God wants us to see-&-speak him). The latter suppression argues that the fear of God's being wrongly considered male, together with the desire to make the masculinity of the biblical deity a smaller target, together meet the burden of proof. I counter that the suppression does too little on either ground to justify the only suppression since Hitler; further, that the theological & pastoral costs of the suppression are too high.

6 Why my focus, in the language-for-God debate, on pronouns rather than nouns? Not just that *all* the Bible's instances of pronouns for God are masculine (whereas only almost noun-instances are). The reason for what one opponent calls my "pronominal polemic" is the **tragic trajectory** we have already experienced. (1) Some liberal church leaders self-suppressed (stopped using) masculine pronouns for God in speaking & writing. (2) Soon the liberal church presses were producing suppressed (short for "masculine-pronouns-for-God-suppressed") liturgical & educational materials. (3) Then we in UCC were hit with a monstrously distortive songbook, THE NEW CENTURY HYMNAL (in which suppression is absolute & total). (4) Concurrently, bowdlerized (synonym for "suppressed") Bibles appeared, defying the canons of common honesty & scholarly integrity (various contortions being shamelessly used to replace straightforward masculine-pronouns-for-God texts, with the result that the savvy reader quickly learns not to trust the translation to be an honorable rendition of the underlying document--eg, Ps.23).

Now I ask you suppressors: at what point, if any, do you say HALT! to this trajectory? When you practice stage #1 suppression, have you not committed yourself logically to the whole slippery slope? I see you, wherever you are on the slope, as at least implicitly promoting "a new religion" (title of my chapter, against THE NEW CENTURY HYMNAL, in HOW SHALL WE SING THE LORD'S SONG?).

7 My **ground** for defending the Bible's pronominal way of speaking of God is not "inerrancy" or "plenary verbal inspiration" or any particular stream in hermeneutical history. Rather, my ground is the nature of the Bible's deity (on which see the question with which this Thinksheet begins). As we understand one language better by viewing it from other languages, so we understand the Bible's deity by viewing him from other bibles, other scriptures. Eg, a certain deity in the Rg Veda is both masculine & feminine but is always referred to by masculine pronouns--as the Bible's God combines masculine & feminine, being the Source of both, but is always referred to by masculine pronouns. (In Christian history, the masculine pronouns for God are so fundamental that "he" is used even when the contextual image is maternal.) Psycholinguistically, the masculine nouns for God ("Father," etc.) float upon, & are less stable than, the pronouns. (So, eg, surrendering "King" would not be as serious as giving up "he"--though I could forsake neither, as I believe both are of the kernel [neither of the husk] of how God asks us to think of him; & I believe that the surrenderer of either is not just unfaithful to the Bible but unfaithful to the biblical God.)

8 The thick, deep issue of hermeneutics is "how God asks us to think about him." Scripture is clear that he wants us to think of him ontologically as beyond gender & representatively within masculinity. Supremely, he represents himself by coming only as a male. As vitally & intimately concerned about history, he is a god (a goddess being vitally & intimately concerned about nature, not history [as the Bible practices goddess-repression]). It has become fashionable (esp. since Tillich) to speak of the God beyond God, which is not a God-picture but a challenge to deity-pictures, including not only masculinity but also personality....Peeling off the two scandals of particularity (viz, God's personality & masculinity, which combine to make the Bible's God-picture), many now have not a God-picture but only a God-idea, a generic (anti-specific) divinity almost indistinguishable from New Age ideas (Energy, etc.). Food only for philosophy & feature-less mysticism.

9 I appeal for "honesty of thought and expression" (a phrase in the UCC Constitution's Preamble), for honorable & nonsuppressive dealing with the Bible's God-picture.