

THE ZEAL TO END GENDER INEQUALITY IN THE DEITY

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A reflection on (1) the 27 Apr 96 Boylston, Mass., "Confessing Christ" consultation titled "What is the Theology of The New Century Hymnal [Pilgrim Press/95]? An Assessment of its Teaching in Hymns and Liturgies," especially in light of (2) literature there made available, in the hymnal's defense, by its publisher, the United Church Board for Homeland Ministries. This literature (coded in this Thinksheet by **boldface** letters):

A A 55p booklet, "The Language of The New Century Hymnal," Arthur G. Clyde (the hymnal's editor)

B Paper, "A Brief Reflection on the Making of The New Century Hymnal," James W. Crawford (chair, Hymnal Committee)

C Paper, "Christian Language and Christian Faith," Daniel L. Johnson, n.d.

D Paper, "Notes in Response to David Bowman's 'Alternative Report' on the Process Leading to the Publication of 'The New Century Hymnal,'" Daniel L. Johnson, 25 Feb 96

E Paper, "Theological and Ecclesiological Strengths of 'The New Century Hymnal,'" Daniel L. Johnson, 11 Mar 96

F Article, "A Hymnal We Produced," Daniel L. Johnson, sent to PRISM March/96

1 Boylston was a model of spiritual-intellectual warfare waged for 5½ hours peaceably, each side speaking its truth in Christian love, with mutual affection despite wide differences on (1) theology (how God is to be conceived), (2) hymnology (whether a hymnal should be representative of its constituency's diversity of hymnic tastes [distributively "offending everybody," as I'd favored in a quotation in UNITED CHURCH NEWS], or "prophetic" [offending only those who consider ideological consistency, a new orthodoxy coercing the oldspeak hymns into newspeak, too great a price of pay]), & (3) perception (of what actually happened in the hymnal-making process).

2 I'll dispose of the 3rd, 1st. Matters of moment are perceived with sharp clarity on both sides, as the present Hezbollah/Israel conflict (two side-by-side circles, without overlap [either conceding anything to the other]). Insiders to the hymnal process (as **B** & **D** show) describe a smooth process of conception-gestation-birth, but the hymnal-committee dissenters who produced the "Alternative Report" (led by David Bowman, who gave a formal presentation of the dissenting view) see not order but chaos, not "phases" (NCH.ix) but makeshift stages to increase bureaucratic control, not a formal ending of the committee "with a farewell party" (**B.10**) but a summary dismissal of the committee by the device of not next-meeting notifying of nonconforming members, not a fulfilment of contract by due deliberation but disrespect for the committee (which, voting once, was not permitted to vote again since it didn't vote right), not honorable reporting but dishonest minutes (underrepresenting the disagreements, especially on inclusive language for God).

Who's right? Both sides are so clear! Charitably, I conclude there was more muddling (in the whole Synod-to-production process) than deception, more bungling than trickery. In the process there was more than the normal adjustments to reality: there was also a reconceiving of decisional authority at least in the sense that apparently at first the committee thought it had vote as well as voice (& was not called "an Advisory Committee" [**B.4**] till late in the process [& in the hymnal itself, x & xi, it's called only "Hymnal Committee"]).

3 I was "a witness at the creation" of (this Thinksheet's title) "the zeal to end gender inequality in the deity." For nine months, Letty Russell & I led an all-Monday-morning doctoral seminar, then had lunch together in my office. Her zeal to raise gender-equality 90° (to apply it to Heaven) was taken up by BHM in 1980 & applied with a fundamentalism-on-the-left narrowness, to make NCH "fully inclusive" (**A.54**), in contrast to the UCC BOOK OF WORSHIP (which was not so radical: e.g., it included the original, unbowdlerized UCC Statement of Faith) & in even greater contrast to the English Bible (the New Revised Standard Version) the hymnal honors for its "guidelines" being against "linguistic sexism" (**A.5**, where the author conveniently omits the fact that NRSV does *not* use inclusive language for deity).

PERSONS: I've mentioned Letty, whose zeal to effect gender equality in God-talk was expressed in her designation of God as non-gender "Householder" (HOUSEHOLD OF God, Westminster/87) & in subsequent writings laying down her

God-talk censorship mandates, of course including no masculine pronouns for deity. (Of course there were other influences on the BHM "guidelines," but hers was the primary one.)....Bruce Metzger (the only nonbiblical name in every copy of NRSV) was close enough to the people, & was himself close enough to scripture, to limit his inclusive language (as I do) to the horizontal, & his NRSV committee took that position. How much grief, alienation, & even schism our UCC would have been spared if that policy, the NRSV policy, had been adopted by Synod/BHM! Close to the people: when I visited him in his Princeton home, he was--in addition to being the NT head of P. Theological Seminary--Sunday school superintendent in his local church. (For more than $\frac{1}{2}$ c. I have known him personally to be close to God & the people, as he was at the beginning of our friendship, when we had scores of long walks together.) The makers of NCH strike me as being less in touch with the people & more concerned, in their ideology, with the "new century."....One more person I must mention: As my teacher long ago, & then as a consultant to a BHM committee on which I was the BHM staffer, Paul Minear, a truly great & widely honored UCC scholar, had the common pulse & touch. Even though our BOOK OF WORSHIP is not as radical-feminist in language as NCH, he cried out against the former as unfaithful to scripture (PRISM, summer/88). He passionately pleads for masculine language for God, & concludes with the "hope" for "churchwide theological discussion" of the issues BW raises. But he's not sanguine: deeply engrained are the "deficiencies in the prevailing climate" within the UCC: "ignoring anti-liturgical elements in the Bible, silencing the God of wrath in the Bible, censoring the Father/family image in the Bible." But the BW producers "quite obviously did not give highest priority to the need for fidelity to the Bible....Had that demand not been foreign [as it is to the surrounding culture], competent biblical scholars would have been consulted before, rather than after, publication." All the biblical-theological faults of BW are compounded in NCH....Minear's article, "The Bible and the Book of Worship" (pp.48-55), would be excellent for group study in congregations. Clearly, he would agree with Daphne Hampson that radical feminism (which NCH represents & promotes) is incompatible with Christianity: "Feminism represents the death-knell of Christianity as a viable religious option" (THEOLOGY AND FEMINISM, Blackwell/90, 1; see also, in Alvin F. Kimel, Jr. [ed.], SPEAKING THE CHRISTIAN GOD [Eerdmans/92], Leslie Zeigler chapter, "Christianity or Feminism?").

4 NCH, even more than BW before it, surrendered historical, biblical, & theological integrity, the former publication even more than the latter. As such, it presents us with an overlay of "a new religion" (as I said in the 12 Feb 96 NEWS-WEEK). (In the consultation's first address, Richard Christensen said "Willis Elliott is right about 'a new religion'" if historical & theological integrity has been abandoned--which he then proceeded to prove had happened.)

Adding to what he said in the Spr/96 PRISM, Christensen made these among other remarks: NCH "obscures or ignores some of the crucial elements of the Christian faith." "Jesus as Lord is radical freedom." The domestic intimacy & coequality in the Trinity correlates with social justice. "Misuse of words only calls us to sound teaching." Let's live & teach "in such a way that the [church] language is understood," for what is understood if the Christian language is surrendered would be something other than the Faith. I was ordained to "the truth of the gospel and the peace of the church," in that order. NCH illustrates both Feuerbachian projections: negative (suppressing "Lord") & positive (expressing "Mother"). "'Father-Mother' confuses the relationships within the Trinity" (& makes UCC sound like Christian Science, in which "mind is reality"). BHM was not ashamed "to redesign the Faith," which "is endless but not limitless." Yes to "new terms consistent with the Christian Story," but no to these "false premises" (behind NCH): (1) Not "Christianity's integrity," but "my own personal experience defines the faith"; (2) The New-Age-Pelagian assumption that "we need no authority over us"; (3) The hymnal "would 'offend everybody' if it were really prophetic," but it aimed to be prophetic in an ideological rather than a pastoral way; (4) NCH is naive & utopian in "not taking sin seriously enough" & in assuming that surrendering the way the Bible speaks of God in alleged sexist language "will lead to equal treatment for all." "If we lose our language, we lose our ways & then our way!" (said a

young Native Am. anthropologist, explaining why he was learning his people's tongue: "Only 22 still speak it, & they are old."). Please "maintain the integrity of the Christian language."

5 David Bowman aimed his address at "the proper use of power in the church," "how we [should] 'do church' in the UCC." The flaws in the hymnal process appear in the hymnal. Tragic, because "people learn more from the hymns they sing than from the sermons they hear." BHM showed "a new audaciousness" vis-a-vis biblical revisionism in its slashing bowdlerization of historic hymns for "the second most important book for Christians." "The Spirit moves also in the pews": "what is [should be] the power of the people" in hymnal-making? "The disuse of [most of] the [peoples'] survey results" by BHM/committee is an instance of "the disempowering of the people." "Subsequent to its dismissal," the committee was dubbed "advisory" (& not permitted to vote, a power the parallel Methodist & Disciples of Christ committees had). BHM told the committee, many of whose members were struggling to get with the people, to "get with the program." The five-member reading panel of BHM, succeeding the hymnal committee, regularized (to radical inclusive language) & "approved 250 hymns in two days," exercising "synoptic tunnel vision" (reminiscent of Leader Keck's statement, in another connection [in THE CHURCH CONFIDENT], about "a sect of those who agree on a particular kind of inclusiveness": such a committee aims to "fit the needs of many or fit the theology of a few?")....(My additional comment:) Since the "Editorial Panel" (NCH.xi) had a comparatively simple job, viz. hatcheting any remaining violations of the radical language censorship mandates, it needed--& had on it--no recognized theologians. Of the five, one was a Roman Catholic with very little personal experience of Protestant hymnody.

6 In military terms, NCH is only a target of opportunity in a larger war. "The size of the theater [of war] equals the size of the danger" (Pres. of Israel, on 29 Apr 96 PBS "Lehrer," in explaining Israel's southern-Lebanon attack in reaction to Hezbollah's rockets). Long permitted to go unchallenged by competent Christian scholars, gender feminism developed into a hardened orthodoxy & has become, as rigid orthodoxies invariably do, oppressive (of scripture, historic hymnody, & of heretics [i.e., those who don't submit to the radical-feminist "inclusive [read, PC "exclusive"] guidelines." In the present dismal atmosphere of universal victimhood (everybody "poor me"), it's easy for everybody in UCC, vis-a-vis the hymnal event, to fall victim to the victim culture. It will take faith, honesty, & courage to break out; love isn't necessary, but it is demanded by our religion.

7 David Bowman made at least two solid contributions to the hymnal: (1) The hymnal contents' division into Faith & Order, Life & Work was a "linkage to the World Council of Churches" & "was a major contribution of David Bowman to the NCH" (E.2); (2) At General Synod, he complained to 17 groups about BHM's dropping of "Lord," which--when Synod voted its qualified restoration--BHM reluctantly restored in a few places, the BHM CEO stating on the floor that BHM was not obligated to obey Synod mandates. (At the beginning of my nine years on the BHM staff, I quickly became acquainted with BHM's arrogance toward other national UCC agencies, the judicatories, & the churches.)

8 In using "Lord" a few times for Jesus but never for the OT/Hebrew Bible deity, NCH oddly recapitulates 2nd.-c. Marcionism. (Marcion disconnected what we call the Testaments from each other. I was so deep into rejecting this danger, in modern guises, that I wrote three chapters [subsequently somewhat rewritten by the author] in Jn. Knox's MARCION IN THE NEW TESTAMENT [U. of Chicago/42].) Lexically, nothing quite so bridges OT & NT as "Lord" (κύριος *kurios*, which in the Christian Bible (which was all in Greek, both Testaments, Christians not taking to Hebrew till the late 4th c.) was Yahweh's (YHWH's) central title in the OT & Jesus' in the New. An oddity: While NCH says its base for the Psalter is NRSV (618: "rendered using the same language standards found throughout the hymnal"), NCH never uses "Lord" for Heb. "YHWH," & NRSV always does! E.g., you'll not find "the LORD is my Shepherd" (Ps.23, 633) but rather the flat, colorless, unpoetic "God is my Shepherd." NCH's editor announces the simple policy here (A.25): "The Psalter...renders the word 'LORD' as 'God' ('Yahweh'...)

and the pronouns 'he' and 'him' as 'God'; 'his' is rendered 'God's.' On the same p. we come upon something ignorant if the editor doesn't know Hebrew & duplicitous if he does: "The Psalms thus rendered have lost neither their meaning nor their

HAGAR THE HORRIBLE

By Chris Browne



sense of adoration....masculine pronouns as subjects of verbs was the result of translating the Psalms into English. They do not exist in the original Hebrew texts." (The NRSV Psalter has "over 1,000" instances of masculine pronouns for God.) What's amiss here? Not anything said, but what's not said. Not said is that the psalmists consistently *think* of God as masculine, the Hebrew verbs assuming rather than subtending gender. E.g., all the 3rd-person verbs for God in Ps.23 assume his gender, the gender of "**his** name" (v.3 NRSV; CEV "your"). But the user of the NCH Psalter would get the false impression that the deity of Ps.23 is not masculine: NCH has not "his" but "God's name," which is further from the psalmist's heart-mind than all those instances of "he" before the translation of Hebrew verbs. The editor's text here gives, wittingly or not, the impression that the psalmist's God was ungendered (in conformity with NCH's policy of degendering God). More: NCH's Psalter uses a masculine term, "God" (not "Goddess"), for its deity, on the false assumption that "God" is generic (!) for deity. Such tergiversation, twistings & turnings, to evade the plain fact that the biblical deity is masculine (though of course not male)! Oh, "the zeal to end gender inequality in the deity"! And the audacity of claiming that the Psalms have not "lost...meaning" when the deity's gender is dumped!

9 None of these six documents mentions the possibility that the Bible's God-talk is non-negotiable for Christians, a matter of **revelation** & not just of "metaphor." Additions (especially for "modern sensibilities"), yes; subtractions, no. In optics, the purpose of a filter is to subtract, in NCH to subtract gender from the biblical (Jewish & Christian) deity. The figure is precise: an optical filter occludes ruthlessly. F uses "filter" infelicitously for its case (5-6): "Woodward is quite right that *The New Century Hymnal* is the first hymnal **intentionally** to apply an ideological filter to the entire corpus of its collection....The reason for use of the filter was precisely faithfulness to the Gospel itself....I am painfully aware that the use of an ideological filter has damaged some of the texts either poetically or theologically or both; I am also joyfully aware that use of the filter has resulted in a creative new freedom from hymnodic sexism." (Refreshing [1] to see the concession in "damaged" & [2] to see the correct optical metaphor [especially since theologians have the bad habit of using "lens" when they mean "filter"].)

By contrast, the editor in A makes no concessions, admits no loss. But when faced with the great hymn "Hail to the Lord's anointed, Great David's greater Son!" this is what he says: "three male names...in the first line needed consideration" (32). Consideration! Rather, elision, eradication: "We hail you God's anointed, the long-awaited One!" It boggles the mind that anyone could say that that bowdlerization, with its leeching out of biblical resonance & theological depth, could be said to represent no loss.

10 Irony: NCH's new sensitivities correlate with linguistic desensitizing, which appears, e.g., in a false doctrine of **equivalency**. We who have been involved in translating the Bible are painfully aware that interlinguistically (from one language to another), equivalency is impossible: the best one can do is arrive at the closest approximation, then use "dynamic equivalency." The same is true intralinguistically (within any language). But time & again in the six pro-NCH documents I listed at the beginning of this Thinksheet, naive statements of equivalency occur. E.g.: "Does 'Sovereign' not mean *precisely* [italics in text] the same reality as 'Lord'?" "Mean" is bidimensional (connotative as well as denotative). The two words are wildly away from "mean"ing the same thing, though roughly they point to "the same reality." Roughly: The biblical note of submission-obedience is better carried by

"Lord" than by "Sovereign." Hidden agenda: The whole idea of submission-obedience is repugnant to the sick hyperindividualism, false autonomy, now infesting our culture & expressing itself in radical feminism; & using "Sovereign" instead of "Lord" panders to this pathology.

My quote was from E.3. This from the same author, at C.3: "Sovereign" says "exactly what 'Lord' says, but...without the overwhelming male bias of the Judeo-Christian tradition." Clearly he includes, in that "overwhelming male bias" of our religion, the consistent masculine gender of the deity. His comment is in line with his filtering enthusiasm (in F.6 he uses "filter"), in his (again, this Thinksheet's title) "zeal to end gender inequality in the deity." Think about it! The chutzpah, the tilting-at-windmills courage to redesign the deity of one's own religion, how the deity is conceived, named, titled, referred to! The project is as pathetic as it is heroic.

The question is not what God is in (ugly word!) "Godself," which only God knows. The question rather is whether God, in **revealing** himself, told us his name (Gn., Deut., Mt.28.19) & how we are to refer to him pronominally, or left us in a free field to choose whatever metaphors & pronouns please us in our particular here-&-now. NCH's hymn spin-doctors are of the latter linguistic-latitudinarian opinion, which accomodates their radical-feminist bias, though they pride themselves on being "free of biases" while contradictorily claiming to "preserve traditional expressions" (A.48).

When C.1 says "our new hymnal endeavors to eliminate [my underlining] male-privileged language," who's doing the privileging? Apparently the boys did it to the girls & to God: masculine language for God has no revelational status. A parallel reductionism is the Jesus Seminar's narrowing of revelation down to documentable history, a narrowing which almost completely eliminates the Gospels as eliminating the masculine in the biblical deity almost eliminates God (so essential to his being is his masculinity, as accurately appears in the UCC Statement of Faith with its masculine titles for God & its 18 instances of masculine pronouns for God).

In NCH, the UCC Statement of Faith gets the same treatment as the NRSV, "rendered using the same language standards found throughout the hymnal" (618). If the Bible is reductionistically abused, should we be surprised that our denomination's Statement of Faith suffers the same fate? Why not, then, the Apostles' Creed (881) & the Nicene Creed (883)? Each of them is presented together with "an alternative version" (Apostles', 882; Nicene, 884). If NCH was not too embarrassed to print the two in biblical, unbowlerized, original form, why was it too embarrassed to do the same with our Statement of Faith (which appears only in an alternative form wrongly called "a Doxology," which has the virtue [?] of being, as less biblical, kinder to "hurting women")? The concealment is farcical, as are all bowdlerizings. (In plenary at the consultation, the hymnal committee chair wrongly synonymized "altered" & "bowdlerized." Privately I corrected him: Bowdlerizations are alterations, but not all alterations are bowdlerizations. Bowdlerizing is removing words one finds offensive [as Mr. B. the word "piss" in Shakespeare, & NCH the word "he" for God].)

11 The **futurism** of "new century" in NCH's title was not the idea of the hymnal committee. But to be used in the next century, it'll have to survive this century. Will it? I agree with St.Olaf College's professor of organ & church music, Jn. Ferguson (Spr/96 PRISM): NCH is "a last gasp of a dying century hymnal flawed by an overenthusiastic and rigid agenda of linguistic political correctness....The title page of the hymnal includes the Biblical quotation, 'Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever,' yet in its consistent denying of the masculine nature of Christ, the hymnal succeeds in contradicting the very statement with which it begins....someone totally unfamiliar with Jesus Christ would need to look very carefully at many texts before being able to determine his gender....The little, persistent tinkering with words is a bit like...water torture. It is the never-ending, drop at a time that becomes unbearable....offensive....[It is] too radical in its approach to God language....In its attempts to be gender-neutral, it has narrowed the possible range of options for God's people to use in describing and addressing the Trinity."

12 Defenders of the hymnal blur the **male/masculine** distinction, as this:

"Willis Elliott insists that since the Bible consistently speaks of God as male [sic], so must all our hymns, or at least we must not alter the vast majority of texts which reflect that bias" (F.5, by a man I admire as an eminent example of the pastor-theologian as well as an accomplished musician & hymnology wonk--"admire" in spite of his taking five swipes at me, two by name, in five pages). Some of my teachers thought that I, in thinking God personal, lacked sophistication: none of them thought me so unsophisticated as to believe God male. If it be objected that unsophisticates hear male when the psalmist says (23.2) "he leads me," will they not also think God to be a person when they hear he's personal? In both matters, we need to sophisticate them in Christian education. Failures in Christian education can't be made up by reducing the Christian language/theology, giving away the store because the customers are too ignorant or lazy to pay....I do thank him for admitting (4) that "theology has so far been unable to devise any satisfactory alternative way to name the three Persons of the Trinity" & that "'Creator' is no adequate substitute for 'Father.'" But then he uses the strange logic (6) that since "we" (the UCC!) "created" the NCH, "critics should stop the nonsense of accusing its creators of ignorance, heresy or villainy." Count that as a sixth (though indirect) reference to me: I accuse "them" (leave me, & most of the UCC, out!) of all three. I am TC (theologically correct, orthodox in speaking to & about God as the Bible does & in compliance with the theological basis of the United Church of Christ as officially expressed in the Preface to our UCC Constitution). PCers such as the creators of NCH tell me I ought to be ashamed of myself for being TC, & I reverse the compliment. Do I read them out of the church? Of course not! But I ask them, if they are in radical noncompliance as the NCH is, how can they honorably stay in the church? Yet they see their diminishing, if not abolishing, the masculine in God as itself a requirement of faithfulness to the gospel in our time. A second kenosis (self-emptying)? The Second Person of the Trinity "emptied himself" into masculinity (Phil.2.6-8; 8x of masculine terminology, + 2x "human being"): the new religionists would like him to empty masculinity out of himself, as NCH reveals scores of times.

13 Since the gender of the biblical deity is everywhere masculine & nowhere (in no names, titles, or pronouns) feminine, why have I never seen this defended in public when it's been publicly attacked? It's not because few have believed it's revelational, one aspect of our religion's scandal of particularity (parallel with the masculine incarnation). No, it's because the feminist gender-police for almost $\frac{1}{4}$ c. have publicly embarrassed speakers whose God-talk is, as is the Bible's God-talk, masculine. Thus buffaloed speakers could save their self-esteem by consulting their feelings of guilt about their "sexism" & then rationalizing their timidity by joining the chorus of feminist hermeneuts. When a strong ideological wind is blowing, few will essay to sail against it; shame & fear convince the many to go along to get along. Now, at the beginning of backlash time, I meet many who feel guilty about having acted on guilt & fear rather than on knowledge & with courage. It's no virtue in us contrarians when we sail contrary to the prevailing winds; never privately or publicly have I failed to stand against emasculators of the biblical deity. It's in character for this "Craigville stalwart" (F.1) to call NCH a "shameful disaster." Those who'd rather not face my defense of biblical religion may deflect my boldness by saying I've a need to be negative. (But my life-story shows that my need to be positive is stronger.)

14 Of those who surrender the biblical deity's masculinity, some **abandon** biblical religion, some **expand** to fill the void caused by the surrender (e.g., Brian Wren's "many names" [NCH.11] & Houston Smith's "many faces of God"--two pluralistic moves). We who do not yield to gender feminism's onslaught **proclaim** the biblical God all the louder, grateful that the attack serves to highlight the masculine aspect of God (as other attacks in other times have served to highlight other aspects of God).

15 I've many notes to comment further on the documents, esp. **A** & **B**, but need to keep this to three sheets. **D.3** shows NCH's ideological bias: "The real issue" is not what the people think "but whether the Gospel calls for" "an inclusive language hymnal." **A.26** speaks of the "bias [!] toward the masculine identity of the second person of the Trinity." **B** operates on the old modernist false divide between "the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith" (8) despite "Jesus Christ...the same."