A Thinksheet toward Craigville Theological Colloquy XV (on theo-linguistics):

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Implications of PRONOMINAL ATHEISM

Does God exist ontologically (i.e. in being)? Atheists (a-theists, non-theists) say no. Does God exist linguistically (i.e. in words & speech)? Theists say yes; but some of late have taken to saying both yes (nominally, in nouns) & no (pronominally, in pronouns). This qualified a/theism is a move made with good intention but linguistic naiveté. It cannot have a long shelf-life.

1 "The problem of reading the Holy Book--if you have faith that it is the Word of God--is the most difficult problem in the whole field of reading." Obviously! But I quote Mortimer J. Adler (p288, HOW TO READ A BOOK [S&S/70--my c., the 10th printing in the first year!]) for a wider point: Respect for language & therefore for literature has so declined that the science & art of reading are in sharp decline--else the project of dumping the Bible's personal pronouns for God could not have achieved any degree of respectability & therefore of practice.

2 IRONY: The *arts* of language-in-use have decreased while the *science* of linguistics has flourished. (The "arts" in the B.A. & M.A were grammar, logic, & rhetoric--"the arts of reading and writing, speaking and listening," which "govern the operations we perform with language in the process of communication....The loss of these arts is in large part responsible for our inability to read and to teach students how to read" [p.85, underlining mine].)

3 Before I go further into linguists, as the upcoming Colloquy requires, let me illustrate, in that familiar chap., Is.40, the problem this Thinksheet is addressing. More than any other chap. in the Bible, this one denounces metaphorical idolatry: "To whom then will you liken God, or with what likeness compare him [v18]?" "To whom then will you compare me...[v25]?" The biblical God is unique, inherently incomparable with rivals or [by extension] with human functionaries such as king, father, judge, husband (masculine **nouns**). But in the chap., God is explicitly masculine 20 times, & implicitly so 13 times (implicitly in verbs & participles, as certain in view of the 20 instances of masculine **pronouns**). (In the chap., the two nouns for deity are not explictly masculine.)

My point? The reader of the chap. (in the original, of course: secondary reading is reading translations) sees that grammatically, God is explicitly personal only in pronouns, the third-person part of speech the pronominal atheists refuse to use. If I were to render the Hebrew without the masc. pns. for deity, I would greatly reduce the sense that the deity is personal (& increase the possible comparison with a cast or carved idol [vv18-20]). Further, I would be unable to translate the subjectless verbs without polluting them with nouns: all the chap.'s subjectless verbs imply a (masculine) pronominal subject. (This polluting is maddeningly repetitous--e.g. "God...God...God"--when pronominal atheists oral-read Scripture. And it is pathetically distortive of the semantics of traditional hymns, as in The New Century Hymnal.)....For our author, Third Isaiah, **God's person rides on his masculine pronouns.** What happens to the Baby when the pronominal bathwater is thrown out?

4 Back to linguistics, the science of language (phonemes, morphemes, sememes [semantics], grammar, syntax, the philosophy & history of language), with which I had to develop some competence in connection with both of my earned doctorates, which required that I be a primary reader of the Bible (i.e. the Bible itself, not translations thereof). I am no novice to the nest of concerns signaled by such a phrase as "gender equity," & in that nest I have a special concern for & competence in one particular egg, call it **documentary-hermeneutic integrity** (i.e. honorable dealing with texts & their interpretation). (In 1941 I helped Jn. Knox write a book on the subject, & I am appalled that latterday neoMarcionites feel as free to abuse Scripture & redesign the biblical deity as did Marcion in the early 2nd century. Yes, the project of the pronominal atheists is as much to redesign the deity as was Marcion's project.)

5 Some church (not school) clergy have been **models** of respect for language & honorable dealing with texts. From my library I lift out just one, viz. Rich. Chenevix Trench. His (1854; I have the 1906 ed.) SYNONYMS OF THE [Greek] NEW TESTAMENT is still a classic I frequently consult. As for our language, he put out

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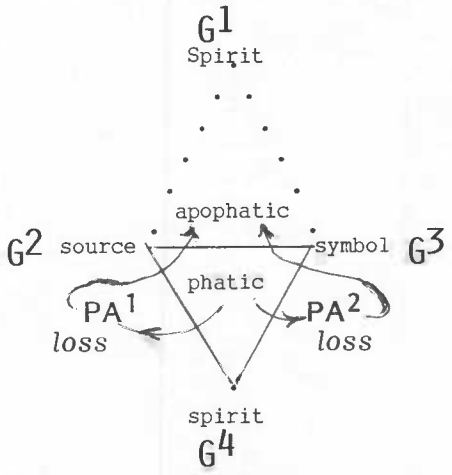
two little gems I prize my copies of: ON THE STUDY OF WORDS (1851; my copy, 1887) & ENGLISH PAST AND PRESENT (pre-1859; mine, 1896). My point? Revisiting these three works reconvinces me that--in spite of the author's not having linguistic tools developed in our present century--he was a master of the full range of linguistic concerns, & writes better than any modern master I know of. (Of course he doesn't have our peculiarly contemporary word-(super)sensitivities. He'd be shocked to hear that "master" is a dirty androcentric word.)

6 As some clergy, some schools have been **models** of respect for language & honorable dealing with texts. One U.S. seminary, The Biblical Seminary of N.Y., was founded specifically to promote those values, using state-of-the-art linguistics applied to Scripture under the banner of "inductive Bible study." In 1937 I had a seminary course taught by their chief exponent of that time, Howard Tillman Kuist; & through my 57 years of ordained ministry I've been informed & inspired by the scientific & devout spirit of that institution (in which I myself was, 1969-79, a teacher). It is not too much to say that in addition to being saddened, I am enraged when I encounter disrespect for language & dishonorable dealing with texts--& the pronominal atheists are guilty of both.

HISTORICAL NOTE: Two Yale U. teachers of Old Testament left at the end of the last century, one (W.R.Harper) to start the U. of Chicago & the other (W.W.White) to start the Biblical Seminary of N.Y. (now N.Y. Theological Seminary). Together they had developed the scientific-linguistic-devout "inductive Bible study" & correspondence courses in Hebrew, Greek, & biblical books.

7 Modern linguistic consciousness is a weaving whose warp is a score of distinctions (e.g. language/speech, referential/emotive, denotation/connotation) & woof a score of awarenesses (e.g. contexts, genres, coigns of vantage). The "Semantics" shelf of my library has a batch of pop-books that were highly influential just before WW2--eg. 1938 (Stuart Chase's THE TYRANNY OF WORDS [Harcourt, Brace]), 1939/41 (S.I.Hayakawa's LANGUAGE IN ACTION [Harcourt, Brace], 36: "The better the communications, the bloodier the quarrels"), & 1941 (H.R.Walpole's SEMANTICS: The Nature of Words and Their Meanings [W.W.Norton]). Since the end of WW2, the flood of pop-books in linguistics has not ceased. In biblical stuides, the top of the pile is G.B.Caird's THE LANGUAGE AND IMAGERY OF THE BIBLE (1980; 1997 Eerdmans reprint with intro by N.T.Wright).

8 For the remainder of this Thinksheet, I'll try a linguistic visualization of the Thinksheet's point. All positive uses of language are in the "phatic" (Gk. "speaking" triangle). You ("spirit") are here, along with your Bible ("source") & the God-idea you derive mainly, directly & indirectly, from the Bible (your God-"symbol"). I'll be referring to the three by their G-numbers....The upper triangle is reality beyond language (thus, "apophatic" [Gk. "no-speaking" or "negative-speaking"]). "God is Spirit" (Jn.4.24; in context, not localizable, a negative about God). (My diamond is sparce, only for the one purpose. E.g. it does not show revelation as downward motion or worship as upward motion.)



Consider now the possible PATHOLOGIES (a.k.a."heresies"), which here we'll call **collapses**. In the case of humanism (anthropolatry), G^1 collapses into G^4. The reverse, G^4 collapsing into G^1, is radical mysticism. G^1 collapsed into G^2 is bibliolatry (Bible-worship, of which inerrantists are in peril). G^1 collapsed into G^3 is theolatry, the captivity of the Ineffable (Lat. "Unspeakable"; Tillich's "God beyond God") by God in Bible speech from/to/about him. But warning: We would be agnostics ("no-nothings" about God) if we strictly held that God-in-himself is entirely beyond our speech. Instead, we believe that by God's choice (revelation) we have (1) real (ontological) knowledge of God (2) in the Bible's Heb.-Aram.-Gk. God-talk.

Finally, beware of **leaks** from the lower to the upper triangle. Leak PA^1 is process atheism, the refusal to speak of the biblical God as personal. Leak PA^2 is pronominal atheism, the refusal to speak of the biblical God as masculine.