

An open letter to Ruth Duck, hymnist (14 hymns in THE NEW CENTURY HYMNAL), & worship teacher at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, Evanston IL

ELLIOTT THINKSHEETS

309 L.Eliz.Dr., Craigville, MA 02636

Phone 508.775.8008

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SIN IS INSUBORDINATION TO THE LORD

Dear Ruth, Duck

It's been a long time since in THE CHRISTIAN CENTURY I criticized you for using the "Lord"-avoiding "Yahweh" in a hymn: you were, I said, in the interest of being sensitive to women who hurt when they hear "Lord," insensitive to Jews who hurt when they see "Yahweh." Since then, we've had numerous conversations about how religious expression today can be both honest to yesterday (violating neither revelational language nor documentary integrity) & aware of today (Fosdick's "abiding truths in changing categories").

This open letter to you is to review your BHM/96 pamphlet "What to Do about LORD." I congratulate you for struggling to find the best way to live in the **tension** between "honest" (your retaining of "Lord") & "aware" (your reducing the usage of "Lord" & seeking alternative expressions for the meanings "Lord" carries biblically-theologically-historically).

1 Let me begin where you end (p.14): "I suggest that 'Lord' be used especially in contexts relating to allegiance or transcendence, but less often elsewhere. Even when 'Lord' fits the context, other words may also be appropriate. ¶ This approach alleviates the imbalance of masculine language in Christian tradition, yet makes room for a name some dearly love....If it does not resolve an issue that troubles many, perhaps it moves the discussion forward."

2 While I'm all for moving the discussion forward, this can be well essayed only if we begin with accurate situaiton-definition with terminological clarity. To that end, I must pick at your "suggest"ion:

3 You suggest that "'Lord' be used especially in contexts relating to allegiance or transcendence." Why did you omit contexts of subordination, such as the Nunc dimittis, which begins with the analogy of the owner/slave relationship (almost all Eng. versions/translation, "Lord...servant"; NRSV, "Master...servant"; UCC BOOK OF WORSHIP & NEW CENTURY HYMNAL, the irrelevant & analogy-destroying "Holy One...servant")? You & I know why. It's because feminism finds repugnant the whole idea of subordination, which is the *negative* necessity of living under a lord, to whom one may or may not give allegiance, the *positive* response to the living-under situation (as in "I pledge allegiance to the flag...").

Consciously or not, you have evaded what is for feminism the most objectionable fact about "Lord," viz. that it reminds "oppressed" women of the enemy, viz. "oppressing" males, including masculine deities. As you know, early feminist exegetes/theologians criticized Reinhold Niebuhr's theology as inherently oppressive because of its tocsin note of sin as insubordination, unsubmitiveness to God. His muscular-manly-masculine theology saw allegiance to God as optional but submission to God as ultimately inescapable. You have mentioned the optional aspect & not the necessary, & to that extent cannot have moved "the discussion forward." As in the hymn I criticized you for in THE CHRISTIAN CENTURY, you continue to be "Lord"-avoiding.

The issue is not just feminist. Males living under the Enlightenment incubus also resent the very notion of subordination, submission. Sinners are, as Niebuhr says, subordinate in their self-love: the Enlightenment heightened both the self-love (preached as autonomy) & the resistance to the Lord God. It's not only radical feminists who love Eve for her insubordination to the God of the Garden! And as you know, the Eden story was preformative of the biblical doctrine of sin, as I indicate in this Thinksheet's title. No wonder the biblical God grates on radical feminists: they preach not against but for women's self-love, which women are said not to have enough of, the Bible being allegedly against their getting enough of.

Here's how you & I have heard/read the feminist attack on scripture. Women need more pride, men less. The Bible's a male book, so it defines sin as pride, meaning male pride. In this the Bible is correct. But if the Bible were for women instead of for men, it would tell them to have more pride. We Niebuhrians & other biblical thinkers can only reply that the pride derivative from excessive self-love is gender-neutral, gender-transcendent: "original sin" (biblically true, though not a biblical phrase) is the *human* condition.

3 Again, your "allegiance or transcendence" is deficient: where's devotion? It's in your next ¶ as "a name [i.e., "Lord"] some dearly love." But is it only "some" (of whom you single out African-Americans)?You teach devotion, worship: is that not, in the Bible, the supreme expression of subordination & allegiance to the transcendent Lord? It seems demeaningly concessive, perhaps even racist, for you to reduce the biblical reality here to merely "room for a name some dearly love."

4 And what's this odd use of "tradition" in "the imbalance of masculine language in Christian tradition"? Here you use "tradition" in the expansive-inclusive sense that has a connotative sniff to it, instead of in the limited normative sense such as in the quadrilateral scripture-tradition-reason-experience. Your ploy cleverly conceals the bare fact that biblical, scriptural, canonical language for God is overwhelmingly masculine. Plainly, you are talking about *the Bible's* "imbalance of masculine language" for God. What if, as I believe, that "imbalance" is a matter of revelation, not just of "tradition"? In that case, you are "found fighting against God" (Ac.5.39 NRSV). The "inclusive language for God" debate is that serious: logomachy (fighting against the Bible's wording for God) = theomachy (fighting against God [the Ac. ref. being the NT's only use of the word]).

Do I then see no way to "move the discussion forward"? I do indeed. But it's by elucidation of the feminine in the biblical God, without reduction of the masculine. This will be for the "greater glory of God, by honoring the many dimensions of the One who transcends all our words" (as your last sentence rightly states as goal)--as your reductionistic strategems against "Lord" are not.....Rightly again, you say (p.9) "expanding the imagery for God...will nurture faith and honor differences." But why do you add "instead of narrowing it"? Who's doing that? Certainly not I, for I am enthusiastic about remarking the Bible's affirmations of the feminine in the masculine God. But your pamphlet aims to narrow, to cut down on the use of "Lord." And even to corrupt the masculine with the feminine, as in your "Lord...her people" (p.12).

5 Are you not here (p.10) in self-contradiction: "I avoid using 'Lord' as a name for God in my own writings, but I affirm what the name 'Lord' means to Christian faith"? You seem to be feeling for a "Lord"-surrogate that will carry the biblical freight of "obedience grounded in an experience of grace." Good luck! The Lord to whom the Bible asks us to submit, whom we are to obey, is to be experienced in the Spirit as gracious and merciful: "Lord" in the Bible is a self-defining word & is not to be either rejected or reduced because of intrusive extrabiblical negative connotations. Faithful Christians will not alter the heart-lexicon of the biblical God to accommodate the world's objections or the hurt feelings of those whom the world has falsely consciousness-raised against the way the Bible speaks to and of God.

6 On p.12 you say that "Almighty" in the (biblical) title "Almighty God" "implies that God causes all evil as well as all good." Oh? This reading is news to the history of biblical interpretation. You have mistakenly separated the adjective "Almighty" from the divine title's noun, a strange literatism on the left. Further, the adjective is "Almighty" (& represents Hebrew & Greek title-words), not "All-Mighty." Besides, biblical monotheism courageously wrestles with what tradition calls "the problem of evil," which is the flipside of the problem of good. Process, among some other theologies ancient & modern, cheaply (dis)solves the problem by denying the divine omnipotence, a move that undercuts the matter & mood of scripture.

7 Nowhere do you recognize the vital fact that "Lord" (κύριος *kurios*) is the exclusive, the only, divine-title **bridge** between the Testaments of the Christian Bible, viz. LXX+NT (all Greek: the Christian Bible has no Hebrew in it; till the late 4th c., when Christian scholars began to be able to read the Hebrew Scriptures, Christian worshiping/thinking was on the basis of the Christian [all-Greek] Bible; "Kurios" functioned for the members of the Trinity [YHWH/Jesus/Spirit]). You are learned enough to know this fact, so I must conclude that it's in the interest of your gender feminism that you do not adduce it....And surely you cannot think that the lifeless, colorless, unfamiliar French-English "Sovereign" might carry the de- & con-notative biblical freight of "Lord"?

8 After saying (p.11) that "transcendence should be redefined," you feministically capture it for relationalism.....P.13: How could God have taken "on the fullness of humanity, not just maleness," without taking on femaleness?