

Last night I dreamed that Loree & I were thinking of buying a car made to fit the existential reality of the driver. If you are not male, you push the "Women's Experience" button; if black, you push the "Black Experience" button. If you are neither, no button: cars were invented by, & are basically designed & produced for, your kind of people--my kind of people. But this last "if" I wasn't aware of till I awoke & realized that all my life I've been driving cars made primarily for us white males....Where would you go from there? Here's where I went:

1 On the principle that it takes one to know one, it takes a man (male) to understand male experience & what a man says/writes. Minor premise: The Bible was written by men from out of their experience. Conclusion: Women can be good, but not first-rate, biblical scholars....PROBLEM: Both the **assumption** (that the sexes cannot understand each other's experience/speech/literature) & the **conclusion** are wrong....SUBPROBLEM: The conclusion is wrong only if the assumption is wrong....SUPERPROBLEM: The assumption is an essential of militant feminism....CONSEQUENT CONCLUSION: Militant feminism must either surrender the assumption or grant the conclusion.

2 Your basic human experiences are birth & death, & they are **genderless**. Your basic human being-here-&-now (*Dasein*) is **genderless**. Your uniqueness (*Einzigkeit*, only-one-ness) is **genderless**. Yes, & your genes, the basic biochemical you, are **genderless**....Moving to the social, friendship is **genderless**....Moving to the legal, both codices (civil & criminal) of fundamental American law are **genderless**.

In short, your race or sex is irrelevant to most of your experience. To emphasize, for political points, your sex or race is to call attention to secondary & superficial facts in your total experiencing. What, then, the effects of this politicization of race and sex? Mainly these:

(1) **Self-segregation**, we/they. We birds of *our* feather flock...."We" are hurting, & must come together for solidarity against those who hurt us. This usually begins with in/formal consciousness-raising groups.

(2) **Insanity**, the steep price of an individual's withdrawal from society or a group's withdrawal from other groups. Eg, Louis Farrakhan's rantings; &, at the Nov/93 WCC Minneapolis "Reimagining" conference, Sophia worship. The insanity is first whipped up emotionally, then becomes intellectual as....

(3) **Ideology**, the fortress-moat-drawbridge mentality first unwilling, then unable, to think logically-comprehensively about anything touching the group's ethos.

(4) **Alienation**-nonassociation-suspicion, the fundamentalist (right, middle, or left) mindset against "enemies," ie outsiders.

(5) **Denial** that any outsider can understand-interpret your group's "experience." Only we gnostics (insiders in-the-know) "get it": everybody else "just doesn't get it." In §1 I parodied this dismal bottom-of-the-toboggan-slide by claiming that since men wrote the Bible, only they can do a first-rate job of interpreting it. On the basis of the gnostic use of "experience," this argument is flawless: in face of the fact that the Church is producing ever more great women biblical scholars, the argument is silly, stupid, sinful.

3 Another of my musings from that dream is that it's silly-stupid-sinful for militant feminism to **emasculate** the biblical God, cutting out all the Bible's references to Father/Son/King/Lord & he/his/him/himself. That way, you won't wind up with a woman (goddess) but you will have produced a sissy/wimp/nerd/dork. The more radical project is to **eliminate** the biblical God, going atheist or substituting a goddess (as eg Sophia, above). A strange but internally logical argument here could run thus: the biblical God has had male experience (viz in Jesus' incarnation) but not female experience. The masculinity of the biblical God is not superficial: the whole Bible shows the biblical God's preferential option for the masculine.

And a less radical project, mine, is to **saturate** biblical exposition with such feminine notes as properly appear in biblical exegesis (eg, yes, the Hokmah-Sophia wisdom references).

4 In all languages, the Bible's deity-titles are masculine: God, King, Lord, Father, Son. The biblical languages have the masculine pronominals he/his/him/himself, which the Bible consistently uses for the biblical God, as do all complete English-language Bibles (including the NRSV, which favors inclusive language except in referencing God). Of European languages, only Dutch has no masculine pronominals: its two genders are common & neuter. Sounds good till you need a masculine or feminine pronominal! English's defect is the opposite: no common gender, so we have used the masculine as "generic," a practice rightly fast eroding.

STORY, adapted from the German folktale warning of oversensitivity to the sanction of public opinion: A man (God as masculine) was riding a donkey while his son walked behind, but people yelled that that was child-abuse. So the son (God as feminine) rode, the father walking behind; but the people yelled "The son controls the father!" So the two carried the donkey on a pole (God as neuter, "it").

Ludicrous, yes, but what actually occurred in Leander E. Keck's THE CHURCH CONFIDENT (Abingdon/93). Here in Craigville last week, he defended his practice of calling God "it" ("non-gender-specific language for God," p.52; see also pp.39 & 51) by saying that he felt forced by feminist pressure to yield "he" & would not conform to radical feminism's "she." Irony: "The Church Confident" with an "it" deity! The cover subtitle is "Christianity Can Repent, but It Must Not Whimper." Father & son carrying the donkey were whimpering, & so is Keck's "it"ing of God.

5 Some "multicultural" biblical scholars, leaning on the variables of social location in the writers/readers of Scripture, teach hermeneutical **subjectivism**. And one such, Denise D. Hopkins (p.38, NEW CONVERSATIONS, UCBHM/Summer/94), puts it this way: "There can be no 'objective' reading of biblical texts upon which everyone can agree." Next p.: "There can be no consensus in the UCC or the wider church about what it means to say that the Bible is inspired or that it has authority....Challenges to the Bible's authority have come from those who have experienced Scripture as a source for their oppression." Note the heavy weight given to personal experience as over against Scripture (& by implication the other elements in the authority-quadrilateral, viz tradition & living Church). Note here the liberationist logic: God has "a preferential option for the poor"; "the poor" means "the oppressed"; so the divine sanction supports the authority of the oppressed's experience over against any "objective" authority of Scripture: "experience" is the control variable & "oppression" is the constant; therefore, those who "don't get it" are out of sorts with the One who has the preferential option for the poor. The special pleading, idiosyncratic defining, & circular reasoning of liberationism are pathetic, & sadly lead to an arrogant blindness of nonnegotiability, a fundamentalism of the left.

6 That car I dreamed of was an "it" with the capacity to adjust for two superficial human differences, viz race & gender. The dream couldn't care less that in reality, no "it" has any such capacity--or what are dreams for? God as "it" has no such capacity. What such thinking means for pedagogy was the subject of Buber's 1922 lectures to Berlin schoolteachers, pub. 1924 as ICH UND DU (Eng.tr. the next year, I AND THOU). A bad teacher is an "it" to the pupils, who are only "it"s to that teacher. A good teacher is a "thou" ("you") to "thou"s ("y'all"). God, the ultimate "I," gives human beings the personal-responsive capacity: we can say/mean/live "Thou-You" to God & to one another. And this capacity for communion, for living in the first & second person, frees us from but also for the third person, for the impersonal ("it") but also for the personal-descriptive ("he," "she," etc.). Religious-language implication: Speaking *with* God is primary, speaking *of* God (doing theology) is secondary though vital for religious life personal & communal.

NOTE: Those who claim their gender or race "experience" is so important as to call for a radical revising of Christians' way of speaking *of* God should think more deeply about the fact that the "experience" of standing in the presence of God as sinners forgiven in Christ & in communion with God & one another has priority

over, & relativizes, speaking of God in the third person (in the New Revised Standard Version, he/his/him/himself, God, King, Lord, Father, Son).

7 What **effects** would surrendering this biblical exclusively masculine referencing for God have? This question led to long debates in the NRSV committee, which finally voted to support its chair, Bruce Metzger, in opting for inclusive language only on the horizontal, ie in human-human relationships. This center may not hold in the next NCC revision, but I hope it will.

Now for some effects of surrendering the Bible's masculine for God (either the pronominals, or also the titles):

(1) **Bowdlerization** of the biblical text. During WWII I received letters with words, phrases, whole sentences cut out, some pages looking like Swiss cheese. Hold up to the light a few pages of your Bible & imagine cut-outs for all masculine references to God. Then imagine other words being inserted as substitutes. No author would tolerate an editor's so thorough a rewrite-job!

(2) The **loss** of "a great wisdom in our language." The phrase is Tillich's (p.53, *THE SHAKING OF THE FOUNDATIONS*, Scrib/48), in a general context. He warns that human life becomes shallow & superficial when for political reasons individuals & groups treat (historic) symbols as though they were mere (pragmatic) signs.

(3) The mutual **alienization**, Bible & believers. UCC President Paul Sherry, who also was at Craigville Theological XI last week, warns that "if we lose Scripture we will lose the heart of this [UCC] church" (p.49, periodical referred to above; previous p.: we are afflicted by "timidity or lack of enthusiasm for things scriptural"). He calls us to be "a church attentive to the Word" --a denominational commitment for concentrated attention 1994-96. He wants to honor the text of Scripture, but his empathy overload for "hurting" feminists has persuaded him to support eliminating he/his/him/himself for God (contra the NRSV). P.44: "The Word ["which is Christ Jesus"] is contained *in* the [Bible's] words but not contained *by* them": Jesus Christ informs but also transcends Scripture. Good. But encouraging, as he does, the bowdlerization of the words the Word is "contained in" fosters alienation from the original (Hebrew-Greek-English) text & thus the very "timidity" & "lack of enthusiasm for things scriptural" which he deplores.

One of my visitors today was a UCC church's Bible teacher who uses only the King James Version & feels alienated from later versions & translations! (He's trying to persuade the church to remove the Good News Bibles from the pews & replace them with KJVs.) Can you imagine how alienating all the current UCC talk about inclusive language for God is to him? (A well-educated professional, very bright, self-converted from Judaism two years ago by assiduous reading of the Bible.)

(4) The **confusion** in the minds/hearts of those volunteers on whom we depend to teach the Faith to the children. Of Scripture, what shall they teach them to memorize? Ps.23 ("The *Lord* is my Shepherd....")? The *Lord's* Prayer ("Our *Father*,....")? These volunteers, to begin with, suffer from severe biblical insufficiency. Loading them with inclusive language for God is enough to sink their will to teach. But since the mainline churches are steadily losing their children, the immediate problem is lessened. The remote problem is....

(5)....that the mainline churches, with inclusive language for God added atop all the other eroders, may **cease to exist**.

8 Turning my dream-metaphor into an allegory, I'll suggest that the car is the Bible. It's not going to change (& should not be changed in language for God), but those who bring their particular "experience" (personal, gender, racial) to it may find it speaking to them in the Spirit as it goes about its business of speaking to our general experience of being beings whose humanity transcends our particular social locations of sex, race, class, nation. What, then, is the revelational status of the Bible's own sociohistorical locations? Absolute, as canonical (in the Bible); relative, for interpretation. God did not choose to put in the heads of some Jews ideas he could have put in other heads at other times in other places, so that the hermeneut can peel off everything else to get at the universal ideas-truths. Rather, God's revelation includes (a very old phrase) "the scandal of particularity," as at the beginning of the Letter to the Hebrews: "Long ago God spoke to our ancestors

in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a [mg, "the"] Son, whom he appointed heir to all things, through whom he also created the worlds."

In the heyday of modernism, Harry Fosdick's phrase "abiding truths in changing categories" prevailed over the scandalous particularity of the Bible. Without this modernistic notion, converting the biblical God into a nonmasculine character would be a scandalous notion! But there's something else....

9 Behind Fosdick's mentality was the same German idealism which at the same time was forming the mind of Paul Tillich, whose expression "the God beyond God" became the most familiar way to speak of God as transcending his own self-revelation. What's problematic in reading Tillich is to figure out, in any passage, which "God" is being spoken of. The "depth" God cannot appear to our finitude: to our finitude he appears as Father & all the other masculine titles & in the masculine pronominals. But now note the postmodern (especially feminist) move to cancel the particularities of Deus Revelatus (God as self-revealed) & build a new metaphorical system directly on Deus Absconditus (God as unrevealed & so "hidden"). Tillich died just before this move was made, & would have thought it an ahistorical oddity (or, as I put it, a blip on the monitor of church history). But the move is proving disastrous in the UCC. Pastors who don't knuckle under to the Newspeak can't get churches; scholars who don't bow down to Newspeak can't get teaching-posts. While the spirit of triumph reigns among the promoters of Newspeak, the spirit of fear prevails elsewhere, including in self-censoring, in-the-closet nonNewspeakers in UCC conference & national offices. The atmosphere is demonic, & all our institutions--including the churches--are suffering. Positions are so frozen into nonnegotiability that honest, open debate seems impossible. But not to give up hope: Today Israel & Jordan signed a treaty of progressive peace, one more "impossible" become actual.

10 Two more of my philosophical-theology teachers had viewpoints bearing on the burden of this Thinksheet--both of them students of Whitehead's "process":

(1) Wieman solved the problem of God's gender by denying God's person! All my returned papers in six courses were marked "A+, but must you believe in a personal God?" Answer: Yes, (1) I experience God as addressing me in my person, & (2) I believe the Bible, which assumes & (Heb.1.1, again) expresses "in many and various ways" God as personal. (Yes, I'm giving great weight to "experience"; but it is to *common* human experiencing, not to my *special* experience of gender [male], race [white], class [middle], or nation [USA].)

More than anyone else, Wieman is the father of process theology: more than any other, he theologized Whitehead. We are now entering the fourth academic generation of his influence.

Importance for the inclusive-language debate? Some feminist theologians are Wiemanite in their metaphysics. Sallie McFague, both Wieman & Hartshorne.

(2) Hartshorne, in whose home I was enjoying a course $\frac{1}{2}$ c. ago now (my daily reading of my 1944 diary reminds me). He's as much remembered for his "dipolar theism" as Tillich is for his "God beyond God," the two expressions being almost synonymous. God is "in" all (pan"en"theism), but his creatures differ in their awareness of him. One pole is in his own being-in-himself (say, the center of a circle), the other is in his here-&-now Presence to a creature (say, the circle's point of tangency to a straight horizontal line). Like Tillich, he could call God "he" (as Wieman could not), & he did not try (as radical feminism & the "inclusive-language Bible") to demasculinize the Bible's language for God or to attach human metaphorical attributes to the God Unrevealed.

11 Radical feminism can have no realistic hope of convincing more than a small splinter of Christians in the world to accept its God-language **revisionism**. Its barbarous term "Godself" shows Pascal's "god of the philosophers" (v. the biblical God) as the armature for sculpting a new divine paradigm & thus a new religion. Contrast p.57 in the best book on God-language (SPEAKING THE CHRISTIAN GOD, ed. Alvin F. Kimel, Jr., Eerdmans/92): Christians will stick with the biblical canon, "acknowledging the normative status of the biblical paradigm and its constituent metaphors and images for Christian thought, teaching, and practice."