Inclusive Language in Theology & Liturgy

Naming the Self-Naming God

A Position Paper on Inclusive Language in Theology & Liturgy

Paper No. 14

1. Introduction: Theological and Liturgical Language

1.1 Language is a complex phenomenon. On the one hand, it is the expression of reality, arising from human experience: articulating our concerns, needs, longings, and shaped by cultural, spiritual and psychological factors. We create language in an effort to articulate our experience and communicate with one another. From this perspective, we know that language often fails us—and not just because of a lack of eloquence. There are experiences (whether joyful or tragic) that are, quite literally, ineffable: unable to be put into words. We have the sense that language struggles to keep up with us. Sometimes it seems as if language is never big enough, never precise enough, never as feeling as our experience demands: too banal, prosaic, sentimental, obscure, inaccurate, ponderous. Language, in this sense, is shaped by experience that it never quite manages to articulate. It strives to maintain a pace that always outstrips it.

1.2 Particularly in the case of theological (and therefore liturgical) discourse, language is always reaching for something beyond. In traditional spirituality, this is called the apophatic dimension (literally, the movement away from or beyond speech): it is the admission of the gulf between language and reality, the awareness of the transcendent which can never be captured in human utterance. In the end, language takes us only as far as the threshold of divine mystery and leaves us there in silence. Theology calls this the via negativa ('negative theology').

1.3 At the same time, we can also say that language shapes our reality. Language, in this sense, is 'the house of being' (Heidegger): the environment in which we live and move and have our being. It not only expresses who we are; it has a critical role in shaping identity. From this angle, language does not strive to keep up with us, but rather is the matrix in which we are formed. It is that vast abode in which we live. Our very experience is shaped by language in a general sense, and by our mother tongue in particular. If we do not have a word for something, it is as if, for us, that entity does not exist.

1.4 Theological language, in this sense, shapes all Christian experience: its liturgy, spirituality, pastoral care, teaching, ethics and apologetics. Liturgy, therefore, needs to be grounded theologically in order to be authentic. The actual words and images of worship are of crucial importance. Here the dimension we focus upon is the kataphatic (literally, moving into speech), that which compels us into speech. Language now frames and upholds our lives: 'in the beginning was the Word' (John 1:1).

1.5 There is a further dimension to theological language—namely, its symbolic character. God-talk is a kind of stretched metaphorical form of language. This is not to deny the referential and objective nature of Christian discourse. Nevertheless, God's elusive being—at the same time, revealed and concealed—calls for symbolic speech as that form of eloquence most suited to worship. Language that is banal, clichéd, ugly and prosaic implicitly denies divine mystery and transcendence, reducing the divine to the mediocrity of unreflective human experience. Correspondingly, language that is overly abstract diminishes divine immanence and personhood. Symbolic language, on the other hand, has the capacity to avoid both extremes, acting as poetry does to renew and revive the linguistic currency and break open the human heart.

1.6 The point needs to be clarified in several ways. In the first place, to describe theological and liturgical language as symbolic is not to claim that its only value is ornamental or pedagogical. Rightly understand, symbol and metaphor (along with simile, a weaker form of metaphor) are not decorative elements to adorn, and thus make attractive, the hard teachings of the gospel. As Ricoeur and others have pointed out, symbols are themselves constitutive of meaning. Metaphors, for example (which are the linguistic manifestation of symbol), create new meaning by bringing together two seemingly unlike elements and forming a new entity altogether.

1.7 Metaphors contain both a like and an unlike dimension; for the cognitive content to be grasped the listener/reader needs to be able to distinguish them. For example, to claim that Jesus is the Light of the world (a Johannine metaphor) is to utter new meaning about Jesus' relationship to creation, to Torah, and to divine moral and spiritual guidance. It does not mean that Jesus is a solar deity. Metaphors certainly can be paraphrased, but the paraphrase is never the same as the original metaphor. In this sense, symbols cannot ultimately be 'de-mythologized'. Form and content belong together, so that to strip away the outer form is to lose something intrinsic to the meaning. Like sacraments, metaphorical language is the bearer of the reality to which it points. It is not merely the sign-post pointing in a direction it never actually takes.

1.8 Because the theological referent of symbolic language is transcendent, more than one symbol or set of symbols is needed to express the breadth and depth of that which it connotes. Although meaningful in itself, no single metaphor is exhaustive of meaning. In biblical language, for example, metaphors inhabit complex fields of reference. The 'logic' of symbolic language is coherent but not necessarily linear. One can move within different constellations, maintaining an internal cogency that does not rule out other ways of expressing the same (or similar) realities. For example, it is possible to speak of Jesus as 'Lord' and also 'brother'; he is the divine 'Son' yet he can also be described as the 'mother' who gives birth to the Church. In each case, the metaphors belong in different fields of reference where meaning has internal coherence and consistency. It is possible to make the leap from one field to another, from one constellation to another, and to find in each a new set of metaphorical 'rules'.

1.9 None of this can be used to imply that metaphorical language is arbitrary and reducible. On the contrary, theology has a body of content that includes certain metaphors as integral to its evangelical core. Some metaphors are more peripheral and evanescent; others, if their content clashes with the Christian gospel (for example, the Gnostic 'laughing Christ' who does not actually suffer on the cross), are illegitimate. Liturgy needs to be clear about the central symbols and metaphors of the faith, knowing that these cannot be discarded without significant loss of meaning. A variety of metaphors can be employed to describe the community of faith or the mystery of God, but that diversity is not infinite. Indeed the presence of diversity in metaphorical language is dependent on a strong sense of centre, which acts as a centripetal force to hold together what might otherwise become fragmented and disparate. The New Testament has the extraordinary capacity to hold the centre yet sanction diversity, and the language of liturgy has the responsibility for doing the same.

2. Inclusive Language for People

2.1 The use of inclusive language for the people of God has come to be accepted in many parts of the Church, and does not need to be reiterated here, nor its detailed enactment in worship. What does need to be confirmed, however, is that the question is not basically an ethical one. The language of 'rights'—so dominant in our culture—is not really appropriate here. The danger of such talk is that it can diminish awareness of the freedom and sovereignty of divine grace. The issue is a theological one. We use language that acknowledges male and female presence in worship for cogent, theological reasons that take into account the cultural context and the role

liturgical language plays.

2.2 Theologically, women and men are created in the divine image, and bear equal responsibility before God for the presence and the defacement of that image. In the liturgy male and female stand before God in their dignity and created splendour, in the shame of their disfiguration and in their yearning for transfiguration. The language which articulates Christian anthropology needs to be transparent in the liturgy.

2.3 This point is at the same time Christological, since all creation—and especially humankind—is created in the image of the divine Word. It is this image that is restored in the Christ event: incarnation, death and resurrection. The Church baptizes females and males, without gender distinction, because the person and work of Jesus Christ are as decisive for female identity before God as for male. Our language both expresses and gives shape to this divinely human truth.

2.4 Females share with males the same eschatological goal: their origin in the triune God is also their destiny. To reflect fully the image of God is the final meaning of redemption and part of the essential purpose of the Church's life. Women's eschatological dignity, like men's, cannot be compromised without damage to our understanding of the Church and its eschatological role. Where the Church in its language and symbolism fails to recognize the mutual participation of female and male in divine worship through Christ, it is untrue to its own theological insights. In its liturgy, it presents a damaged offering to God. The language of liturgy is, in this sense, both performative and restorative.

3. Theological Principles for Divine Language and Imagery

3.1 The issue of language and imagery for God and Christ is more complex theologically than for people-language. Once again, it is not a question of 'equal rights' but rather the issue of how to embrace an appropriate Christian understanding of God. The role of tradition here is vital. Bearing in mind the distinction in the way language operates, a number of theological principles need to undergird liturgical language. Without it, such language is arbitrary and fragmented, without core or content.

3.2 Scripture depends largely on male imagery for God—father, husband, king, lord, master—and invariably employs male pronouns even where the imagery is gender neutral. This, at least in part, reflects the androcentrism of the cultures out of which the tradition arose. It is not the full story, by any means, but it is an important factor. It is foolish to ignore the contingent nature of theology and language, just as it is mistaken to underestimate the coherency which holds together symbol and content.

3.3 In the Judaeo-Christian tradition, God is holy mystery, beyond all human categories, including those of gender. Whatever may be concluded from Christian language, God is neither male nor female. Although divine mystery is disclosed in gendered language, there is no disagreement among theologians (Jewish or Christian) that God is holy and wholly other, transcending the world in every sense. God's mystery always escapes us and cannot be captured in human utterance (cf. John 1:18, 6:46). The point is made in the tradition itself. Gregory of Nyssa, for example, in his Homily on the Song of Songs concedes that God can be named as Mother as well as Father, since 'every name which is found is of equal power in manifesting the [divine] incorruptible nature: neither female nor male defiling the significance of God's undefiled nature'. This is not a reason to de-personalize God. The divine mystery is never less than personal. God cannot, in this guise, be turned into an impersonal or abstract force vaguely lying behind the universe.

3.4 At the same time, God is revealed to human beings and the creaturely world in various ways, times and places. We need to beware of falling victim to a cultural relativism that denies divine Self-naming. This revelation

is not a human initiative and has the capacity, through sovereign grace, to embrace, challenge and transform our lives beyond anything we deserve or earn. The divine Self-naming is gift and grace from beginning to end: in the 'book' of nature, in the election of Israel, in the coming of Jesus Christ and in the Holy Scriptures. In liturgical language, we are dealing with divine self-revelation, not primarily engaged in our own fumbling attempts to name the incandescent, self-communicating God. For Christians, this fundamental revelation is of a trinitarian God—a doctrine that articulates the divine economy as transcendent, incarnational and immanent.

3.5 For all that, God is also graciously revealed within the structures of language: through its capacities and even its ineptitude. The only adequate 'speech' is the Word-made-flesh, a word not of our own making but clothed nonetheless in the structures of a language, however feeble, that we understand from birth. Only the divine Word reveals God to us, yet that Word paradoxically is bone of our bones and flesh of our flesh. Divine revelation and human experience meet harmoniously in this understanding of the incarnation. Divine kenosis ('self-emptying') means that, though Self-naming, God also permits us to name God in human symbol, metaphor and speech. In this sense, Jesus himself is the archetypal Symbol or Icon of God, giving rise to the many symbols of the faith to which he gives himself in beneficence and love. Within divine sovereignty, we are giving a part to play in shaping a language fit for the God who lives our life and dies our death. This is the very basis of the Church's life and the transfiguration to which we are called.

3.6 The maleness of Jesus is a vital element in this theological schema, provided that it is understood aright. On the one hand, Jesus' maleness does not imply that God is male. If that were so, women's (and Gentiles') salvation would be in serious jeopardy. The early Church understood that God in Christ embraced all humanity (and therefore all creation). However, God chooses to be revealed to us within the structures of the flesh: Jesus is male, Jewish, located in a specific historical and geographical context, belonging to a certain class, etc. The 'scandal of particularly' is itself the guarantee that each of us, in our particularity, is called into the family of God. Both the particularity of Jesus and his universality need to be acknowledged in the liturgy. As in John 4:1-42, Jesus enters into conversation with a Samaritan woman as a male Jew; by the end of the narrative, the Samaritans acknowledge him as 'Saviour of the world'. John shows us how we need the union of the (divine) universal and the (human) particular if we are to discover the God who, in Jesus Christ, has taken up and 'recapitulated' our humanity (Irenaeus).

4. Implications for Liturgical God-Language

4.1 What do these essential principles mean for the actual images and symbols we use in liturgical language? In the first place, the phrase 'Father, Son and Holy Spirit' is part of the core of historic Christian faith (Matt 28:19). While some have tried to argue that the maleness of the imagery makes its unacceptable, there is a strong counter-argument (even in some feminist theological circles) that divine fatherhood is a 'deconstructive' symbol for Christian faith. In the Fourth Gospel, the 'Father' of Jesus Christ is not dominating and overbearing, but rather self-giving, vulnerable and inclusive: in effect, an anti-patriarchal figure who deconstructs human experiences of paternal indifference, remoteness and abuse with life-giving love. Similarly the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32) presents a father whose benevolence and patience are extravagant by any standards, especially those of the ancient world. In her commentary on the Lord's Prayer, the Protestant Reformer, Katharina Schütz Zell, speaks of the title 'Father' in similar terms:

What a friendly, pleasant word it is, yes the most comforting and charming word ever to arrive on this earth! It procures us everything we need, brings all friendship into being, turns away all punishment, yes softens every heart …

4.2 In theological terms, 'Father' is primarily a symbol for articulating the intimacy, yet distinction, between the first and second Persons of the Trinity. Only in a secondary sense does divine fatherhood relate to human beings in their relationship to God, the Fountain-source (cf. 20:17). Yet if we discard this imagery, how else can we capture what is a vital theological dynamic? The loss is surely too great. More important to reclaim the title, to give it fresh content, to re-capture its transformative power and to educate the people of God in the creative power of their own symbols. In certain designated parts of the liturgy—for example, in baptism—the traditional 'Father, Son and Holy Spirit' is the appropriate symbolic language to be used: it is revelatory, biblical, theological, personal, non-modalist and succinct. This is apart from ecumenical considerations that are also significant. To avoid such a metaphor would be to lose something of the very core of Christian faith.

4.3 Similarly the title 'Lord' is important in its theological dimensions. Once again it has a Christological focus: the title Kyrios in the Greek Older Testament, used as a means of avoiding the divine Name, is the same title daringly used of the Risen Christ in the New Testament (Phil 2:10-11) who possesses divine sovereignty over all creation. The same title belongs also to the Holy Spirit whose gift of freedom is itself the sign of a shared divine being and authority (2 Corinthians 3:17-18). The title 'Lord' in the biblical sense deconstructs all rival, human pretensions to ultimate power and authority. Human beings cannot usurp divine sovereignty in their dealings with each other—or, for that matter, the creation. Most replacements for 'Lord' lose this metaphorical sense and do a great disservice to theology. What seems to be gained in inclusive language is lost in other respects. We need the dynamic weapons of the faith to challenge precisely the kind of destructive power that has kept women (and others) subservient for centuries.

4.4 The use of 'Sovereign One' is a useful alternative to 'Lord', emphasizing that divine sovereignty is not gender-specific. For most Christians, however, the title 'Lord' has connotations of warmth and love, as well as sovereignty, regardless of its political origins. Like monarchical titles (king, queen), it can only be rejected by a kind of fundamentalism of language that sees the original historical and political context as narrowly definitive of meaning. Yet there are other dimensions to such titles: they may retain strong mythological significance (for example, they belong within the genre of children's literature, even today) that relates more to the imagination than to any external social structure, past or present. Like all language, the meaning shifts with the context. A Quaker who refuses to use any titles, or engage in any courtly behaviour before other human beings, can still acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord. There is no necessary conflict. Human beings have the capacity to live in more worlds than one. Like metaphorical constellations, these images abide within their own structures and resist being bound by a wooden, linear form of logic.

4.5 All this suggests that we need to think carefully about language for God in liturgy. We need to become, in the best sense, both conservatives and reformers. On the one hand, we conserve what is best and most precious in the tradition—guarding the treasure-chest we have inherited. On the other hand, we need also to be prepared to expand and re-form the tradition, without uncritical acceptance. We are given, after all, a creative role in handing it on to future generations.

4.6 Both Scripture and tradition make some, though limited, use of female imagery for God—mother, Wisdom (Sophia), midwife, hostess, housewife. Such language is not nearly as common as male imagery, nor is it accompanied by feminine pronouns beyond the immediate narrative. This is largely for cultural reasons. On this slender yet solid enough basis, maternal images can be developed for liturgy, either explicitly or implicitly, for all three Persons of the Trinity. In the New Testament, the title of 'Father' must be read in an implicitly inclusive way, yet needs at times, in appropriate ways, to become formally explicit. Among other things, 'Father' is a way of

speaking of God as the Source of all being, yet modern biology (as opposed to Aristotelian embryology) is aware that both father and mother share the same life-giving role. Indeed, the Father has many 'maternal' characteristics within Scripture. This encourages us to find ways of broadening our imagery, without detracting from the richness of the tradition. 'Our Motherly Father' is a phrase suggested by Moltmann; another, clumsier phrase is 'Father-Mother God'. Other alternatives use similes to expand and clarify this metaphorical language:

'O God, you love us as a Father
and care for us as a Mother'.

4.7 Mediaeval theologians such as Anselm of Canterbury and Julian of Norwich used the image of Christ as Mother, giving birth to the Church (cf. John 19:34) and feeding them with the 'milk' of the eucharist. Similar imagery to that of Anselm's Canticle is found also in Katharina Schütz Zell: 'he has given birth to us in such cruel pain, has nourished us and given us life, breast-fed us with water and blood from his side, like a mother stilling her child'. The imagery has its basis in Scripture: Jesus is the mother hen lamenting the way Jerusalem has rejected the protection of his wings (Matt 23:37-39/par.); from his crucified side flow blood and water just after his Mother and Beloved Disciple are given to one another at the birth of the Christian community (John 19:26-27). In a similar vein, the Holy Spirit has maternal overtones: for example, in the imagery of John 3 (especially v. 5), where the mysterious Spirit is pictured as labouring to give birth to believers.

4.8 Such language needs to be developed with the same kind of care traditionally taken with male language and symbolism. Christians are clear in what sense they can speak of the Father-Son relationship and in what sense they cannot ('begotten not made'). There are undoubted dangers in the use of maternal imagery: we need to be guard against pantheistic implications, because of the language of Mother Earth (with its background in ancient female chthonic deities). We can be encouraged to use the female imagery of Scripture and tradition, but only with care and respect. If symbols are not mere decorations, then their power for good and evil is enormous, especially since their impact is subconscious as much as conscious. Here we are not engaged in the pursuit of ideological decorum but rather in unfolding the dynamic revelation of the triune God. Sensitive allusions that expand rather than contract the people of God's spirituality are most appropriate for worship.

5. Conclusion

In the end, the decisive questions of inclusive language are not about equality or human rights, but rather the inadequacy of our language to bring to speech the trinitarian God of Christian revelation. This deity is hidden and revealed, transcendent and incarnate, utterly beyond us yet intimately close. Only the language of poetry and icon—graceful, delicate, elegant, succinct—can articulate the God who has already named us into being before ever we could speak a word. Even so we will know that our words can never fill the gap; can never be more than a stammering at infinity (Rahner); can lead us only to silence. In this light, questions of gender, though important, are decidedly secondary.

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