

## The Power of Language

Most police officers of the Greater Manchester (Police) Forces in England are upset by having to walk a politically correct tightrope. In 2000, all the members were given a 16-page document to read, to learn and inwardly digest if they were not to risk falling foul to their superiors. This tract entitled *The Power of Language* instructs the officers how to address such groups as homosexuals, feminists, the disabled and ethnic minorities in such a way as not to cause offense. Examples of terms that must be avoided, and why, include: *What is your Christian name?* - Don't ask, as it might offend other religions. *Are you married?* - It might offend homosexuals or people with a live-in partner. A senior officer dismissed all of it as a waste of time and an insult to common sense, adding: "Police have enough on their plates these days without piling on more problems. We're scared to open our mouth in case we offend anyone."

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Language is more than a vehicle for communication. The booklet distributed to the Manchester police is only one example of how language is used by politically correct ideologues to change society. Language, claims Dale Spender in *Man-Made Language*, is not neutral; it is itself a shaper of ideas. He argues that through the use of patriarchal language, men deny women their rightful place in our society. He charges that women have not been allowed to construct their own meanings or to name their own experiences. The task for women, therefore, is to construct a "female reality" to express their own meaning. Consequently, the dominant religious and cultural heritage we have received defines femaleness as inferior to maleness. Like Spender, many feminist writers have discussed the way in which they think language is often loaded against women. They insist that gender is socially constructed within a patriarchal culture, and serves men. The issues for these feminists, therefore, are replacing the established patriarchal order, and raising the awareness of the adoption of female rather than male guiding principles.

Feminism has also impacted the church. Cultural trends influence the church more often than the church influences contemporary culture. The church, theology, and liturgy became targets of feminist criticism from the start. The modern feminist movement in the church originated in the US, during the 1960s where the term "feminist theology" was also introduced. It refers to a way of doing theology, which takes seriously the criticism and conclusions of contemporary feminism. The feminist theology's central concern is the question of the use of language: the twin issues of inclusive language and, perhaps more critically, of the language chosen to present the images of God. The question is: Do women and men experience, and make sense of, the world in different ways? If so, do they experience God differently too? Feminists say that church history is the record of only a male "faith seeking understanding," a patriarchal account of what happened throughout the ages. They fantasize about a non-sexist early Christian culture and a non-patriarchal church gradually being re-discovered through the efforts of feminist research and theology. The feminists argue that women have been oppressed in the church since the second century and that the language of the church has fostered

that oppression. For example, the generic terms, such as man, and mankind, have come to be seen as the definitions of what it means to be human. In 1974, at a World Council of Churches' women's consultation in Berlin on "Sexism in the 1970s", saw sexism not so much as a struggle between the sexes as a struggle within the wider struggle for liberation of the oppressed classes.

Some well known feminists, who have gone to the extremes, are Mary Dale, Rosemary Radford Ruether, and Virginia Mollenkott. Mary Dale (b. 1928) abandoned her attempt to reform official Roman Catholic attitudes and became a post-Christian radical feminist. She argues that language is an instrument of oppression, reflected in such obvious cases as the use of the pronoun *he* and the noun *man* when these are supposed to "include" women. She defines radical feminism as the cause of causes, which alone, of all revolutionary causes, exposes the basic model and source of all forms of oppression. By the use of masculine titles and pronouns for God, males have been given the right to rule over females. "Since God is male," Mary Dale says, "the male is God." She even makes the absurd claim that the attempted annihilation of all life is the lethal intent of the patriarchs. Another outrageous statement is the claim that the Incarnation is the "mythic super-rape of the Virgin Mother".

Rosemary Radford Ruether's (b. 1936) books analyze the effects of "male bias" in official Church theology, and seeks to affirm the feminine dimension of religion and the importance of women's experience. For Ruether, conversion from sexism means both freeing oneself from the ideologies and roles of patriarchy, and also struggling to liberate social structures from these patterns. In *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a feminist theology*, she says feminist theology makes explicit what was overlooked in male advocacy of the poor and oppressed. Therefore, "liberation must start with the oppressed of the oppressed, namely, *women* of the oppressed."

### **Inclusive Language**

No aspect of the feminist movement has affected the church's life more basically than that movement's attempts to change the language used in speaking to or about God. In *The Divine Feminine: The Biblical Imagery of God as Female*, Virginia Mollenkott writes about the political effects of naming God as exclusively masculine. She says because God is husband-like, husbands are god-like. Because God is father-like, fathers are god-like. She claims that this view of God sets the stage "for exploitation of girls and women." Consequently, to combat abuse and make language all-inclusive, the language of the Church must be changed. Marjorie Procter-Smith, in *Her Own Rite: Constructing Feminist Liturgical Tradition*, charges that traditional liturgies are designed by, approved by, or written by leaders of a religious group or denomination. She claims that they are most likely the product of men or at least reflect male interpretations, and support patriarchal interests.

Substantive changes are now taking place in the once traditional language of the church. The triune name of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is routinely ignored; baptisms are occurring in the name of inclusive substitutes. For examples, liturgies are composed

that omit references to God as Father or Jesus as the Son, some of which directly address God as mother and other feminine titles; the masculine pronoun for the deity is said to be inappropriate usage. In speaking of God and Christ, some simply use "she" and "her."

Mainline churches were right in front in altering liturgies. Beginning with the National Council of Churches' (US) *An Inclusive Language Lectionary* in 1983, inclusive language steadily made its way into the Scriptures, prayers, liturgies, hymns, and publications of these mainline churches. the Bible's use of *Father* is changed to *Father (and Mother)*, *Lord* to *Sovereign*, *King* to *Ruler* or *Monarch*, *Son of Man* to *Human One*, *Son of God* to *Child of God*. Most of the changes were imposed by the hierarchies in denominational headquarters, and often to the dismay of the worshippers in the pew. Mollenkott notes that when the National Council of Churches announced it was recommending an inclusive language lectionary, its Commission on Faith and Order received over two thousand angry letters in a period of several months. But she argues that inclusive God-language in Christian worship might well benefit contemporary men even more than women. She states, "It is quite possible that one reason why so few men attend church regularly is that they are unconsciously repelled by being called toward an exclusively masculine God."

### **Who is Jesus Christ?**

Feminist theologians give different answers to the question: "Who is Jesus Christ?" Some new politically correct translations of the Bible use inclusive language and refer to Jesus as "child of God" rather than "Son of God", as "human one" rather than "son of man", on the assumption that Jesus' humanity is of greater significance than his masculinity. Some claim He is the male disclosure of a male God whose representative can only be male. Mollenkott sees Christ as our birth-mother in creation, incarnation, and redemption. She says that Christ wants us to know about God's motherhood so that our love will be fully attached to God. Mary Dale calls the worship of Christ a "form of idolatry that functions to mandate and legitimate intolerance, self-hatred, hatred and scapegoating of others."

Ruether says that to believe Jesus as God's "last word" and "once-for-all" disclosure of God, located in a remote past and institutionalized in a cast of Christian teachers, is to repudiate the spirit of Jesus and to recapitulate the position against which He himself protests. Naomi Wolf, in *The Beauty Myth*, charges that the anti-woman bias of the Judeo-Christian tradition left fertile ground for the growth of the new religion. Its hatred for women meant that the latter, even more than men, had to suspend critical thinking if they were to be believers. This new religion charged women with sin and sexual guilt, and offered them redemption only through submission to a male mediator, Jesus Christ.

### **The Holy Trinity**

Feminist theologians have made several attempts to create alternative images for the Holy Trinity. For the Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, some *substitute* Creator,

Liberator, and Comforter. The most familiar, arising from within the early feminist liturgical movement, is "Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer (or Sanctifier). Some tortuous explanation tries to demonstrate that the Third Person in the Trinity is feminine. Mollenkott argues that, since the Hebrew word for Spirit is feminine, and the Greek word for Spirit neuter, there is no earthly reason for referring to the Spirit as masculine – "except for the assumption that God is masculine!" In other words, patriarchal language forces the church to believe in a masculine Holy Spirit.

### **The Feminist Goddess**

Feminists, who are consequent in their approach to theology, use the power of language to alter the Biblical doctrine of God. In their search for a female face of God, many feminists began to examine religious traditions that have traditionally been regarded as being antithetical to Judaism or Christianity, namely, Goddess religions. They insist the church needs to discover new female names for God, including Goddess, Mother, Sister, Lady, Queen, Grandmother. For example, Marjorie Procter-Smith states that many feminist theologians have recognized that the use of gender-specific language, far from being avoided, rather must be claimed by discovering or constructing female referents for God. Sallie McFague, in her book *Models of God* offers the models of God as mother, lover, and friend. In 2002, the United Methodist Church published a supplement to its hymnal called *The Faith We Sing* in which Methodists are to sing praise to "Strong Mother God, working night and day." The United Church of Christ's Book of Worship prays, "You have brought us forth from the womb of your being." But the feminists also suggest the use of female pronouns freely to claim "neutral" names for God such as Redeemer, Lover, Liberator, Friend, Judge.

According to Mollenkott, in the Protestant evangelical tradition, maternal images for God were totally depressed. She says, "Although we proclaimed our absolute devotion to the Bible (*the Sola Scriptura* of the Reformers), obviously there was a great deal of imagery that we missed. Much of it was the warm, intimate, affective imagery of an immanent, maternal God. No wonder we were doctrine oriented – as one wag put it, 'Clear as ice and just as cold'". She calls the God of Naomi in the book of Ruth as "the God with Breasts", "the undivided One God who births and breast-feeds the universe." A feminist goddess has given birth to the world! Mollenkott can say that "our milieu is 'divine'". For her the book of Ruth shows the triumph over the barriers of racism, classism, and sexism. She also believes that God should serve human beings. "The Bible teaches not only male-female mutual submission, but also divine-human submission." God is our servant as well as our master. And she argues that Proverbs 31 is a full-scale description of Yahweh as the perfect female homemaker, the perfect wife to humanity.

### **The Bible and the Power of Language**

We should be concerned about the inroads feminism is making into the church. More and more evangelical publishing houses and parachurch ministries are pushing feminism. The controversy over inclusive language is not a minor issue. It is a watershed issue for the church. All of our life is touched – the relationship between men

and women, our attitude at work, as the Manchester Police force experienced, our view of God and the Bible. It also fosters the feminization of the church and contributes to the secularization of "the male world". But the ultimate question is: Will we remain faithful to God and His Word or will we surrender to the spirit of our times? The Roman Catholic Church struggled with the issue of the use of feminist language and concluded that it contradicts the historical teachings of the Christian faith. In 1992, the Vatican held up the translation of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* into English for two years until the feminist language and, therefore, ideology had been removed. In October 1994, the Holy See disallowed the use of the *New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)* for use as a text in Catholic worship and catechetics for the same reason.

How do we name God? By attempting to change the Biblical language used of the deity, the feminists have in reality exchanged the true God for those deities which are "worthless idols," as Jeremiah put it (2:11). By insisting on female language for God, the feminists simply continue to emphasize the non-Biblical view that God does indeed have sexuality. But God is without sexual characteristics. It is universally recognized by Biblical scholars that the God of the Bible has no sexuality. Sexuality is a structure of creation (cf. Gen. 1-2). "I am God and not man, the Holy One in your midst," God says in Hosea (11:9). God is never called "Mother" in the Bible and is never addressed or thought of as a female deity. That was unique in the Near Eastern world; Israel was surrounded by people who worshipped female deities. And finally, if God is identified with His creation, we make ourselves gods and goddesses – the ultimate and primeval sin, according to Genesis 3 and the rest of Scripture. But "it is He that made us, and not we ourselves" (Ps.100:3).

The feminists forget that we don't name God. But God names Himself. The Christian faith is a revealed religion. If God had not revealed Himself in His Word, we would not have known His identity. Unless God reveals Himself, He remains unknown to humanity. Only God can make Himself known. The Bible uses masculine language for God because that is the language with which God has revealed Himself. The God of the Bible has revealed Himself decisively as the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The changes feminists try to introduce lead to an alienation from the Gospel. There is neither a goddess, nor a feminine Christ, nor a female Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and from the Son and is one with them. To abandon or to reject the Trinitarian naming is to create a new religion, a new god. The triune God is not a deity of sexism and patriarchy but the God of the Gospel who saves men and women from their sin and liberates them for love, discipleship, and joyous fellowship in the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Feminist theology takes away our hope. We look forward to the new heaven and earth where we shall be forever in the presence of our heavenly Father. By faith in Him we shall always be more than conquerors, and nothing shall separate us from the love He has for us through Jesus Christ our Lord. Praise be to God – Father, Son, and Holy Ghost!

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