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# Issues in the Debate Over Inclusive God-Language in the United States

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神の両性表現に関するアメリカでの討論における諸問題

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アメリカでは総称的な「*he*」や「*man*」等を両性が含まれる言語に代えるための議論が世俗的、宗教的な言語両方に当てはまる。しかしながら、神様を「*Father*」, 「*Lord*」, 「*King*」等と呼んでいる伝統的な男性表現を代えることは、キリスト教会に殆ど限られた両性表現問題である。このような言語変革は、しばしば「God-Language」と「expansive language」と呼ばれ、いわゆる主流プロテスタント教会では一般的に支持し、いわゆる福音主義プロテスタント教会はそれに反対している。この論文では非宗教的なガイドライン作家、神学者、諸宗派、諸キリスト教会の見解を通してこの問題の両側面を考察する。最終的に、合意することは難しいが、少なくとも一人の福音主義神学者は一定の和解の望みはあると述べている。

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**Key words:** Inclusive God-language, Expansive Language, Evangelical Protestant, Mainline Protestant, Bible Translation, Church Liturgy

In contemporary American society, the use of inclusive language is often a conscious choice; namely, language that includes women, racial and ethnic minorities, the mentally and physically disabled, the aged, those with nonmainstream sexual orientations, and others who have been made linguistically “invisible” or degraded and excluded by traditional language use. Those young enough to have been educated in the use of inclusive language may use it more or less unconsciously, but for perhaps the majority of Americans, especially those educated in the use of “traditional,” noninclusive language, whether to use inclusive language often becomes a conscious choice.

The nonuse of inclusive language may reflect a lack of awareness or even insensitivity to the issues addressed by inclusive language, or it may reflect a conscious decision to use traditional noninclusive language. Some who resist inclusive language do so because they see it as another corruption of the language, perhaps more serious but not unlike the use of *hopefully* instead of *it is hoped*, or respond-

ing “No problem” instead of “You’re welcome” to “Thank you.” Others resist its use on sociocultural grounds, particularly the use of gender inclusive language, which they view as a reflection of the corrupting influence of feminism on traditional societal and familial structures.

Some of the criticism of inclusive language also reflects a certain frustration with the process of language change. In some cases, inclusive language offers the user a bewildering array of new expressions referring to the same group, and it is often confusing to know which expression to use. The example of people with disabilities is illustrative. Is the traditional term *handicapped* passé? *Disabled* seems to have been one of the earliest candidates to replace it and is now widely used, but many other candidates have subsequently been suggested, some seriously, some facetiously, and others derisively. The several *-challenged* alternatives are a case in point: from the respectable *physically* or *mentally challenged* to the laughable *vertically challenged* for *tall*. The latter is not considered serious inclusive language reform, but it may nonetheless be used to deride the whole trend.

One’s religious beliefs and related positions on current social issues can also be reasons to be for or against the use of inclusive language. In an earlier paper on the use of inclusive language in English Bible translations (Burger, 2006), it was pointed out that many aspects of the debate over inclusive language are relevant to both the secular and religious worlds, such as the use of *he*, *man*, *mankind*, etc. as generics. In this paper, however, the debate over an aspect of inclusive language in the United States that is largely confined to the Christian church will be examined; namely, the debate over so-called “God-language” as it affects Bible translation and church liturgy.

## **Bible Translation and Church Liturgy**

Translation is not a precise science, and opinions often differ as to the best way to translate a certain word or expression. This is even more so in the case of Bible translation, which carries the additional weight of the reverence in which the sacred texts are held. As new translations continue to appear, many religious people, both clergy and lay, find fault with aspects of the new translation and choose not to use it, particularly for public worship. This situation is not confined to the English-speaking world. For example, in Japan, many churches and church-related schools continue to use the fifty-year-old *Kougoyaku* Japanese translation of the Bible instead of the now already twenty-year-old *Shinkyoudouyaku*.

In the Judeo-Christian tradition, God speaks to humankind through revelation that has been passed down from generation to generation as recorded in the Holy Scriptures. However, the Scriptures

have not always been available to individual believers through translations into their own language. For example, in Europe in the late twelfth century, the Roman church sought to control dissemination of the Bible by going so far as to forbid not only unauthorized vernacular translation but also “the possession of the scriptures in any language, or of breviaries, hour-books and psalters in the vernacular” (Johnson, 1976, p. 254). After Roman Catholic missionary activity began in the sixteenth century, the same urge to control orthodoxy and prevent heresy combined with European racism to lead to bans on vernacular translations outside Europe, despite the fact that such translations were actively promoted by individual Catholic missionaries. For example, in 1555 the first Mexican synod ordered that all sermons in the local languages be seized, and another synod ten years later “forbade the Indians access to the scriptures, in any language” (p. 403).

On the other hand, from its beginning Protestant Christianity has emphasized the importance of understanding “the Word of God” in the believer’s own language, including non-European languages. Subsequently, the number of vernacular translations beginning even before Luther’s own German translation of 1522 has been phenomenal. Of the world’s 6,912 known living languages (Gordon, 2005), the United Bible Societies reported that as of the end of 2005 at least portions of the Bible had been translated into 2,403 different languages (“Scripture Language Report 2005,” 2006, para. 2). This was an increase of 26 languages or dialects from the end of 2004, and translation into new languages is ongoing. It is estimated that all or part of the Bible is currently available to some 98 percent of the world’s population in its own language (“Bible Translations,” n.d., “Modern Translation Efforts” para.).

In the English-speaking world, the twentieth century was especially noteworthy for the explosion of new translations of the Bible. Between 1901 and 1996, there were more than 80 English translations of all or part of the Bible (Marlowe, n.d.), and there have been at least seven new English translations of the entire Bible since the year 2000 (“List of English Bible Translations,” n.d., “Complete Bibles”). One of the most controversial issues surrounding a number of these new English translations, especially from the last quarter of the twentieth century up to the present time, has been the use of inclusive language.

What affects Bible translation also affects church liturgy. In both areas, the controversy surrounding the use of inclusive language has taken two broad forms: language for humans and language for God, which is often termed *God-language*. Language for humans in both Bible translation and in church liturgy parallels secular inclusive language and has generated as much, if not more, acrimony between supporters and opponents. God-language, on the other hand, is a distinctive feature of Christian<sup>1</sup> inclusive language and is even more controversial than inclusive language for humans. The

major issue concerning the use of inclusive language to refer to the Judeo-Christian God is the historically and traditionally patriarchal nature of the conceptualization of God: God as *Father*, God as *king*, God as *Lord*, etc.

## Secular Views of Inclusive God-Language

Some secular writers of guidelines on the use of inclusive language adopt a dichotomous approach to secular and religious inclusive language. Marilyn Schwartz and the Task Force on Bias-Free Language of the Association of American University Presses (1995) advise that

the gender-specific language that some religions use to refer to deity may be appropriate in a discussion of religious traditions. Such language, too, may warrant explanation or comment from an author. A writer may choose gender-marked language to describe the beliefs of a patriarchal religion but employ gender-neutral terms to analyze them. (p. 35)

Others treat its use in religious contexts as a straightforward issue of word choice, much as they treat its use in secular contexts. For example, Maggio (1997, p. 172) suggests avoiding gender-specific pronouns that refer to God by replacing *he* or *him* with *God* or another name for God, rephrasing the sentence, or replacing *he* or *him* with *you/yours* or *who/whom/that*. Similarly, Dumond (1990, p. 78) suggests these inclusive language alternatives to *Father/Master God*: *Creator*, *Parent*, *Protector*, *Almighty Being*, *Power*, *Love*, *Holy One*, *God*, and *Spirit*.

However, a number of secular guideline writers also deal with God-language in a more detailed way, touching on some of the controversial issues that divide American Christians. Maggio (1997) herself is openly critical of the historical assignment of the masculine gender to the Christian God:

Although we have not assigned God an ethnic origin or an age, we have thought nothing of assigning a gender. . . . And contrary to what most people understand, theology has never ruled that the Christian God is male. (p. 171)

Miller and Swift (1976) similarly point out that

as apologists of these religions have insisted for tens of centuries, the male symbolization of God must not be taken to mean that God really is male. In fact it must be understood that God has no sex at all. But inevitably, when words like “father” and “king” are used to evoke the image of a personal God, at some level of consciousness it is a male image that takes hold. And since the same words are used in reference to male human beings—from whom, out of the need for analogy, the images of God have been drawn—female human beings are perceived as less godlike, less perfect, different, “the other.” (section 1, para. 4)

Maggio offers a similar assessment: “God’s presumed masculinity in Christianity has provided a religious legitimization of the social structures and attitudes that treat women as second-class, non-normative, derivative human beings” (p. 172). For Miller and Swift, the ultimate issue is “whether these metaphors . . . encourage a double standard for evaluating human beings in addition to reinforcing an idolatrous concept of the deity” (section 4, para. 4).

### **Religious Views of Inclusive God-Language: The Bible as “an Accurate and Authentic Self-Revelation of God”**

Opposition to inclusive God-language is based on the authority of the Bible as God’s word and self-revelation. As such, it is argued that the words used in the Bible and in translation to refer to God should be respected and retained. This position is outlined by Mark L. Strauss (1998, p. 176), an evangelical scholar who, although largely in support of inclusive language Bible translation, nevertheless opposes inclusive God-language. He argues that “the most fundamental (and important) reason for retaining the father language of Scripture” is that, “if the Bible is indeed God’s word—his self-revelation—then the symbols, analogies and metaphors that the Bible uses are themselves authoritative and so ought to be retained,” and that “fatherhood is one of the primary symbols through which God chose to reveal himself.” He continues, “While it is true that God’s Word comes to us through limited human language and in the context of fallible human culture, the cultural symbols used are themselves part of the authoritative revelation” and “to reject, alter or downplay the fatherhood language of Scripture is to deny the authority of the biblical text” (p. 176).

Strauss acknowledges the claims of “many scholars” that “biblical symbols such as Father, Lord, and King actually distort and misdirect our understanding of the nature of God” and “represent only blurred images of God’s true nature and are badly distorted through the lenses of a sinful culture of patriarchy and oppression” and agrees that “all vestiges of this patriarchy must be removed if God is to be truly seen” (p. 176). Nevertheless, he is critical of the work of feminist scholars such as Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, whom he accuses of accepting as authoritative “only those parts of the Bible that support the struggle for liberation” (p. 176). According to Strauss, Fiorenza has written that “‘only the nonsexist and non-androcentric traditions of the Bible and the non-oppressive traditions of biblical interpretation have the theological authority of revelation if the Bible is not to continue as a tool for the oppression of women.’” (p. 177).

Strauss’ response to Fiorenza encapsulates the key point in the evangelical position: “Is the Bible merely a culturally relative record of human reflections about God or is it an accurate and authentic self-revelation of God?” (p. 177). Strauss contends that an evangelical view of Scripture demands

that the monarchical and patriarchal descriptions of God were “chosen by God and mediated through his Spirit-inspired human agents” rather than being “inappropriate remnants of sinful human culture” (p. 177). He argues that “the remedy for this problem is not eliminating Father language for God but allowing the biblical revelation to transform our conception of fatherhood” (p. 177).

## The Metaphorical Nature of Inclusive God-Language

A number of secular guideline writers, as well as Christian scholars and laypeople, emphasize the metaphorical nature of God-language. Maggio (1997), for example, contends that “the key to inclusive God-language is to be conscious that we are using metaphors . . . to make a pure Spirit more accessible to us” (p. 172). The purpose of metaphor is, in fact, to provide “a new way of seeing” (*An Inclusive-Language Lectionary*, 1988, p. 255).

Miller and Swift (1976) point out that “since the major Western religions all originated in patriarchal societies and continue to defend a patriarchal world view, the metaphors used to express their insights are by tradition and habit overwhelmingly male-oriented” (section 1, para. 4). Nevertheless, Maggio notes that as early as the fourth century, St. Gregory of Nazianzus “summed up traditional thought when he wrote that ‘Father’ and ‘Son’ as applied to the persons of the Trinity did not name their natures or their essences but rather were metaphors for their relationship to each other” (p. 171).

The feminist theologian Rebecca S. Chopp (1989) offers a similar perspective:

Since “God” by definition transcends all symbol-systems, we must begin, like theology, by noting that language is intrinsically unfitted to discuss the “supernatural” literally. . . . all the words for “God” must be used analogically—as were we to speak of God’s “powerful arm” (a physical analogy), or of God as “lord” or “father” (a socio-political analogy) or of God as the “Word” (a linguistic analogy). (p. 1)

Based on this line of thinking, Maggio (1997) offers the following guideline on inclusive God-language: “. . . use a variety of metaphors to enlarge our images of God, balance male and female metaphors, and use masculine or feminine pronouns only for specific, limited metaphorical uses (otherwise eliminate sex-specific pronouns)” (p. 172).

For many secular feminists and feminist theologians, language reform alone is not sufficient. For example, what Janet Martin Soskice calls “the feminist objection” (1992, p. 86) is “much broader than the simple objection that the language of the Bible and church excludes women” or merely that the metaphors for God are primarily male. Soskice pointedly frames the issue in terms of an individual’s

relationship with God: “To speak of God as king, ruler, lord is to portray God as so omnipotent and other from God’s creatures as to make reciprocity and love between God and humankind an impossibility” (p. 86). She maintains that “the mere complementing of male images with attendant female ones is clearly not enough” and that nothing short of “reaching right into the ‘fatherland’ of the Christian tradition” will suffice. Soskice quotes Rosemary Ruether’s pessimistic assessment of the situation:

. . . tinkering with the language of the liturgy, changing “he” to “he and she,” may be a cosmetic change which, from the feminist’s point of view, conceals a more profound and idolatrous tendency to pray to the male God. . . . There is little consensus, however, even among feminists, about how such problems should or even could be resolved. . . . One could speak of God as “Mother-Daughter-Spirit,” but this language finds no home among the texts from which Christianity takes rise, and is perhaps also open to hierarchical reading. (pp. 86-87)

If, as Ruether contends, none of the potential solutions seems satisfactory, Soskice (1992) predicts that some feminists will choose to leave Christianity altogether. However, she suggests that the theologian Jürgen Moltmann’s analysis of the name *Father* for God offers a more hopeful approach. As Soskice explains, Moltmann argues that *Father* in reference to God has a background in patriarchy, “the ‘Universal Father’ and ‘dreaded Lord God’ (here the term is used metaphorically)” (p. 92), on the one hand, but that the term also literally refers to God as the father of the “‘first-born’ son.” Soskice argues that “it is the second sense that must be decisive for Christianity. . . . The father of Jesus . . . both *begets* and *gives birth* to his son and through him to the *twice-born* family of God.” While Moltmann contends that God is, thus, a “‘motherly father,’” which feminists may find dissatisfying, Soskice maintains that “this passage makes the ambiguity of the classical symbolism obvious” (p. 93).

The evangelical theologian John W. Cooper (1998) concedes that the trend toward inclusive God-language is “not an insignificant development or a passing fad” (p. 24) and is, in fact, “increasingly the practice of individual Christians and churches alike,” not merely a “theological position” (p. 16). Furthermore, “. . . gender-inclusive theology and language for God are currently among the most powerful forces in mainline Christianity. This trend is viewed by many as a natural outcome of the full recognition of women’s equality” (p. 21).

Yet, Cooper remains unconvinced by arguments that the metaphorical nature of God-language justifies inclusive God-language. He analyzes female imagery to refer to God in the Bible and argues (1998, p. 89) that the mere existence of this imagery alongside male imagery does not lead to the conclusion that inclusive language for God is valid.

Cooper’s analysis yields a “significantly smaller (number of genuine feminine references to God)



than is often claimed" (1998, p. 89), and demonstrates that feminine terms are never used to identify God directly in the same way that masculine terms are used for this purpose, such as *Father*, *king*, *judge*, or *shepherd*. Cooper's main argument is that the metaphor of God as father as it is manifested in the three persons of the Trinity is

definitive of the Christian faith and cannot be revised or superceded. This definitive revelatory status of the triune name and the fact that Jesus commanded the church to baptize and disciple the world in terms of that name are two of the most compelling reasons why biblical Christians are reluctant to adopt inclusive language for God. *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit* is the final form of God's self-revelation in history and in Scripture. (pp. 109-110)

According to Cooper (1998), those he terms "inclusivists" claim "that gender-egalitarian language—the regular use of feminine as well as masculine names, titles, appellatives, and pronouns—naturally arises from the presence of both masculine and feminine references to God in Scripture" (p. 135). However, he argues that the Bible never implies that God is a "feminine person."<sup>2</sup> Rather, the feminine references are "cross-gender images, feminine figures of speech predicated of a linguistically masculine person" (p. 135).

Cooper's conclusion is that inclusive God-language is a "serious challenge to the historic faith that flows from Scripture" and "ought to be vigilantly resisted" (p. 293). For Cooper, the issue is not whether one is for or against equal treatment; rather, he asserts that "it is the Christian faith—the gospel itself—that is at stake" (p. 39). Nevertheless, he is willing to concede that "it does raise valid concerns about human gender relations that the church must address" (p. 293), and he appears somewhat less than vigilantly resistant when he observes that "it also reminds us that biblical Christianity can speak of God with feminine language in ways that are faithful to his revelation." He agrees that Christians "ought to testify to the motherly as well as the fatherly love of our Heavenly Father" (p. 294).

Cooper also acknowledges that "there are enough elements of truth in the inclusivist position to require that traditional Christians become open to some feminine language for God and address legitimate issues of sexism in church and society" (p. 40), and he advocates the use of some feminine imagery within what he calls "the *biblical pattern of language for God*" (p. 40, italics in the original). By this he means the "primacy" of traditional references to God, such as *Father*, *Lord*, *King*, and even *He* (p. 18), which he appears to fear inclusive language advocates would replace with female metaphors such as *Mother*.<sup>3</sup> Cooper emphasizes that Christians are not "required to reject all feminine language for God even though the use of gender-egalitarian inclusive language cannot be derived from the Bible"<sup>4</sup> (p. 135), but rather should "sometimes (use) figures of speech that compare

God to a mother or another female, as Scripture itself does” (p. 18). In the end, the evangelical hostility to feminism seems to motivate Cooper’s somewhat contradictory position, at least from the inclusive God-language perspective: “Recovering the biblical feminine imagery for God is not capitulation to the women’s liberation movement. It is an example of continuing reformation in the light of the Word of God” (p.18).

### **Inclusive God-Language in Liturgy: God as “Father,” “Mother,” and “Parent”**

While support for inclusive God-language can be found among a wide variety of individual Christians—Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox as well as Protestant—and is also to be found among American Jews (Gillman, 2004), divisions over the issue among Christian denominations are largely along theological lines. For American Protestants, those theological lines primarily follow the mainline-evangelical<sup>5</sup> division. This is not to say that mainline churches are united in support of inclusive God-language. However, the main opposition, as Cooper (1998) notes, can be expected from “fundamentalist, evangelical, and traditional confessional churches” (p.38). As an example, Cooper cites the case of the evangelical Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRC), which condemned inclusive God-language in 1997 as “incompatible with Scripture, the confessions of the church, and healthy piety” (p. 36). The website of this denomination states its position unambiguously: “The endorsement or use of contemporary inclusive language for God (both gender-egalitarian and gender-neutral) is unacceptable to the CRC” (Christian Reformed Church in North America, 2006, “Position” section). The denomination bases this position on “the norm of Scripture and on the principle that Christians ought to speak of God in the way that Scripture speaks of God”<sup>6</sup> (“Position” section).

The position of the mainline Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is stated in broad terms that could be interpreted in a number of ways, which perhaps reflects the difficulties of balancing competing views within a denomination:

The church shall strive in its worship to use language about God which is intentionally as diverse and varied as the Bible and our theological traditions . . . . the church struggles to use language which is faithful to biblical truth and which neither purposely nor inadvertently excludes people because of gender, color, or other circumstance in life. (*Book of Order 2005-2007*, 2005, section W-1.2006b)

Perhaps because of its vagueness, an attempt was made to amend this statement in 1999. The proposed amendment sought to force the use of inclusive God-language in the PCUSA by changing the

opening words from “the church shall strive to use” to “the church shall use” and to substitute “shall use” for “struggles to use.” However, the amendment was defeated by a vote of 402 to 123 at the 211<sup>th</sup> General Assembly (Odom, 1999, para. 1).

The mainline United Church of Christ is often in the forefront of implementing progressive theological and social positions, and this denomination’s statement on inclusive God-language is the most detailed and nuanced of those surveyed here. The rationale for the denomination’s position is that “Jesus Christ is ‘the same yesterday, today, and for ever’, but the language, customs, and historical situation of the people of God are continually changing” (“Introduction to Worship,” 2002, p. 6 “The Contemporary Context” section, para. 1). Accordingly, the Eleventh General Synod of the church

explicitly instructed that a *Book of Worship* be characterized by language that is truly inclusive with respect to God and to human beings. Although the generic use of masculine terms may have been acceptable in the past, it excludes and offends many sensitive people of faith today. Further, the use of only masculine nouns and pronouns for God and of masculine generic terms for humankind has hidden the rich feminine imagery for God and God’s people in scripture. . . . (p. 6 “The Contemporary Context” section, para. 2)

In terms of specific God-language, the *Book of Worship* has taken care

to avoid exclusively male terms for God. For example, the word *God* is frequently used where the masculine word *Lord* predominated in the past. *Lord* is retained as an important title to identify Jesus Christ, but not the only title. In general, masculine language is not used in reference to Jesus Christ except where there is some necessity to identify Jesus by gender. . . . (pp. 6-7 “The Contemporary Context” section, para. 3)

The denomination views the importance of inclusive God-language as not only a matter of social justice, but also of attracting those to church worship who may feel excluded:

Inclusive language is far more than a matter of male and female imagery. Behind the aesthetic dimension of human words towers the prophetic issue of social justice. It is obvious to people of goodwill that words have the power to exploit and disfranchise as well as to affirm and liberate those to whom they refer. . . . If people do not find themselves in the language of worship or find themselves there in derogatory images, it should not be surprising if they absent themselves from the worshiping community. (p. 7 “The Contemporary Context” section, para. 4)

Another name for inclusive God-language is “expansive language,” which additionally implies an expanding understanding of God that goes beyond the traditional male metaphors discussed above. For example, the website of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America explains the denomination’s position on inclusive language in a section called “What Is the Proper Use of Language in Worship?”

(ELCA Division, 2003). This document states that language describing God is

descriptive, not literal. Scripture provides us with rich and expansive images to describe God, including: eagle (Deuteronomy 32:11-12) baker (Matthew 13:33) hen (Matthew 23:27) wind (Acts 2:2) bread (John 6:33-35) rock (Isaiah 17:10) and light (John 8:12). Assigning male pronouns to human occupations (such as judge, teacher, potter, guard) or to objects (fortress, rock, shield) should be avoided when they are used as metaphors for God. (para. 10-11)

This Lutheran statement points out that the traditional use of the metaphorical *Father* in worship to refer to God expresses the intimate relationship between God and the church, just as Jesus addresses God as *abba* (“father”) in the Lord’s Prayer to suggest the “loving and trusting relationship between parent and child” (para. 12) with no intent to assign human male sexuality to God. However, the statement notes that “because sin can distort even the fundamental relationships of parents to children, the image of a father may be difficult to comprehend for some who have experienced alienation in their relationship to a human father”<sup>7</sup> (para. 13). The statement avoids the issue of addressing God as *Mother* in addition to, or in place of *Father*, and instead suggests other titles that “suggest the activity of God” (para. 14), such as *Advocate*, *Healer*, *Savior*, and *Refuge*, as well as biblical titles such as *Adonai*, *Source of Life*, *Root of Jesse*, and *Alpha and Omega*. The closest the statement comes to using *Mother* to refer to God is in the simile “God who cares for us as a mother hen cares for her chicks.”

An earlier example of inclusive God-language for liturgical use, *An Inclusive-Language Lectionary*,<sup>8</sup> *Readings for Year C* (Division of Christian Education, 1988), had already taken the step of referring to God as both father and mother (“God the Father [*and Mother*]”), with instructions that the reader might omit the bracketed, italicized words. Similarly, in the translation of *The New Testament of the Inclusive Language Bible* (1994), Jesus refers to God as our “heavenly Parent” in his teaching about prayer in Matthew 6:5-13. The fact that *An Inclusive-Language Lectionary* was “prepared for voluntary use in churches” (title page), and use of *The New Testament of the Inclusive Language Bible* is similarly voluntary, while the denominational statement of the ELCA is binding on churches in that denomination, may account for the more “radical” God-language of *An Inclusive-Language Lectionary* and *The New Testament of the Inclusive Language Bible*. In fact, *An Inclusive-Language Lectionary* argues that Jesus’ own reference to God as *abba* (“father”) was itself “radically nontraditional” (p. 256), and that this fact “warrants the use of nontraditional intimate language in contemporary reference to God” and “points to the close relationship between language about God and language about the human community” (p. 256).

Isaac (2000) points out that in the world of the Old Testament “the imagery for God was predomi-

nantly masculine, which reflected the patriarchal culture” (“The Revelation of God in Scripture” section, para. 1), and she is in agreement with *An Inclusive-Language Lectionary* (p. 256) that God is only infrequently referred to as *Father* in the Hebrew Scriptures. Isaac notes that the writers of the New Testament inherited this patriarchy, and she cites Gail Ramshaw as arguing that “it is more likely that the use of *Father* in the New Testament period derives from the patriarchal rule of Caesar Augustus who adopted the title *Pater patraie*, ‘father of the fatherland’ ” (para. 2). As a form of protest, according to this understanding, devout Jews began to call Yahweh their “Father.”

Individual congregations, as well as denominations, differ greatly in their response to the issue of God-language. One local congregation that supports the use of inclusive God-language, the Episcopal Church of Saints Andrew and Matthew in Wilmington, Delaware, has set up an Expansive Language Task Force that has produced a comprehensive statement of the congregation’s position. This statement explains that the use of “inclusive or expansive language is . . . not based on a desire to be ‘up-to-date’. It is no mere boarding of a politically correct bandwagon” (“Expansive Language,” 2002, para. 3). The statement acknowledges that “the Church has been particularly guilty of excluding women” in its use of language (para. 5) and recognizes that language use is an important issue in the education of children and in mission and evangelism. The statement asserts that “the use of expansive language becomes particularly important and sensitive when we are describing or addressing God” and concedes that

(the male images of the Divine) are a precious part of our heritage, from which we continue to draw. What we are attempting to do is not a negation of the rich parts of our tradition. It is rather an expansion of our language about God. The Scriptures, theologians, poets, musicians and artists provide other overlooked images of the Divine. These are often feminine or gender-neutral. (para. 9).

This Episcopal congregation’s statement does not directly recommend the use of *Mother* to refer to God, but, quoting from the New Zealand Prayer Book, the statement does note that “ ‘God’s nature . . . is beyond human conception; certainly beyond description in human language. All language about God is analogous, which means that we are always describing God in human terms like father or mother. . . .’ ” (para. 10).

## Conclusion

The importance attached to the language of the Bible and of worship cannot be overstated. As the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America puts it:

Words have power. . . . Because God in Christ is called the Word, the use of words (language) in Christian worship should be given careful attention.

Language both reflects and forms human attitudes and actions. As language shapes and influences human perceptions, the language used in worship shapes and influences our perceptions of God. Because language is created and used by humans, it reflects the imperfections and limitations of humanness. Therefore, no use of language can ever totally describe or represent God. (ELCA Division, 2003, para. 1, 3, 4)

Despite the limitations of language to describe or represent God, it remains one of the most important tools for doing so. In terms of the power of language used in worship to shape and influence our perceptions of God, congregations that accept the idea of expanding those perceptions may begin the Lord's Prayer by praying to "Our Father and Mother who art in Heaven." Christian scholars and Christian denominations either condemn or recommend this kind of God-language based on their differing interpretations of Scripture and Christian theology. Individual Christians are similarly divided along theological as well as sociocultural lines. However, even Christians who support inclusive language use in both secular and religious contexts may initially find inclusive God-language, especially the co-equal use of *Father* and *Mother* in reference to God, a bit strange-sounding. The Expansive Language Task Force of the Episcopal Church of Saints Andrew and Matthew in Wilmington, Delaware, recognizes this when it asserts, "We recognize that a commitment to using expansive language and images challenges the Church, because it is unfamiliar" ("Expansive Language," 2002, para. 11).

The example of the United Church of Christ, earlier referred to as often in the forefront of implementing progressive social and theological positions, illustrates some of the problems of introducing inclusive God-language in the liturgy. Of the many inclusive language hymnals that have been published since the 1980s, the denomination's *The New Century Hymnal*, first published in 1995, has probably made the most sweeping changes in God-language, and, as a result, has often been labeled "radical." One of the most controversial changes was the original elimination of *Lord* as a reference to God for the reason that "the word implies authority, but it also is a word of gender" (Clyde, 1998, p. 37) and, thus, implies "sexism and injustice for some and a historic and meaningful committed relationship for others" (p. 38). At the 1993 General Synod of the United Church of Christ, advance copies of some of the hymn changes were shown, causing enough opposition, even from so-called liberal pastors and delegates, to lead to a Synod recommendation that the word be restored in reference to Jesus Christ, which the hymnal committee did. Nevertheless, this resulted in the word *Lord* appearing "with less frequency than in many other hymnals" (p. 37) and often substituted with *Sovereign*. In this hymnal, even The Lord's Prayer is renamed "The Prayer of Our Savior." Such changes did not

satisfy everyone, but, according to Clyde, the “the reality is that ‘Lord’ is respected in the hymnal as one of the many valid names used for Jesus Christ” (p. 38).

Clyde (1998) summarizes the philosophy of this hymnal’s God-language:

God is perfect. Human beings are not, and neither is the language that we use to speak of God.

The real danger lies in making idols of the images—the words—we use to address God, thus mistaking these words for the essence of God. . . . If we seek to limit our language to single formulas, we run the risk of our images of God, and thus our relationship with God, becoming static and tied only to the past. This is at the heart of the issue of language change. (p. 50)

Indeed, this is the essence of the position in support of inclusive God-language.

At the linguistic level, because of differing theological interpretations and sociocultural views, evangelical and mainline Protestants disagree on the basic need for change. Additionally, many secular feminists and feminist theologians argue that the issue runs much deeper than linguistics and that merely adding feminine references for God does not address the deeper issues of patriarchy in religion and society. As the feminist theologian Rosemary Ruether (quoted in Soskice, 1992) acknowledges, “One could speak of God as ‘Mother-Daughter-Spirit,’ but this language finds no home among the texts from which Christianity takes rise, and is perhaps also open to hierarchical reading” (p. 87). This interpretation is backed up by the evangelical theologian John W. Cooper (1998), who notes that “fully *gender-inclusive language for God* as currently advocated cannot be warranted according to the standards of historical-biblical Christianity” (p. 40, italics in the original). But unlike Ruether, Cooper is willing to admit that “. . . there are enough elements of truth in the inclusivist position to require that traditional Christians become open to some feminine language for God and address legitimate issues of sexism in church and society” (p. 40). Even this concession is not sufficient for feminist theologians like Ruether, who pointedly argues that “we cannot simply add the ‘mothering’ to the ‘fathering’ God, while preserving the same hierarchical patterns of male activity and female passivity” (quoted in Soskice, 1992, pp. 86). In the same way, changing masculine pronouns to inclusive ones, for example, is merely “cosmetic change” that obscures “a more profound and idolatrous tendency to pray to the male God” (p. 86).

However, many evangelicals counter, with Strauss (1998), that the monarchical and patriarchal descriptions of God were “chosen by God and mediated through his Spirit-inspired human agents” and that rather than “eliminating” references to God as *Father*, the solution lies in “allowing the biblical revelation to transform our conception of fatherhood” (p. 177). In this view, if the Bible is to be seen as “an accurate and authentic self-revelation of God” (p. 177), the God-language of the original cannot be altered.

The view of many mainline Protestants may be more flexible, but it is nonetheless as determined and resolute. The United Church of Christ, for example, views inclusivity in terms of social justice: “behind the aesthetic dimension of human words towers the prophetic issue of social justice.” In addition, it is necessary for the church to be inclusive so that people will “find themselves in the language of worship” and feel welcomed into “the worshiping community” (p. 7 “The Contemporary Context” section, para. 4).

The evangelical theologian John W. Cooper’s (1998) argument in many ways underscores this conflict between religious tradition and secular/social modernity that is at the heart of the debate. For example, on the one hand Cooper judges inclusive God-language to be “a serious challenge to the historic faith that flows from Scripture” (p. 293), yet at the same time suggests this enticing possibility of reconciliation:

The movement for inclusive language for God in mainline Christianity . . . does raise valid concerns about human gender relations that the church must address. It also reminds us that biblical Christianity can speak of God with feminine language in ways that are faithful to his revelation. We Christians ought to testify to the motherly as well as the fatherly love of our Heavenly Father. (pp. 293-294)

However, he again severely qualifies this seeming tolerance, if not total acceptance, of some of the arguments in favor of inclusive God-language by ultimately recommending “Christians begin using feminine language for God according to the pattern of Scripture, but not according to the gender-inclusive pattern” (p. 17). In the end, Cooper’s ambiguity on the issue, based as it is on the competition between his more rigid theological stance and his less rigid attitude toward gender issues, well illustrates the divide that exists on the issue today and suggests that the gulf will not soon be bridged.

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## Notes

- 1 God-language is also an issue within American Judaism (Gillman, 2004). However, this paper focuses only on God-language within American Christianity.
- 2 Proponents of inclusive God-language often point out that God is not meant to be a gendered being in the Bible, whether masculine or feminine.
- 3 "Accordingly, I recommend that Christians begin using feminine language for God according to the pattern of Scripture, but not according to the gender-inclusive pattern" (Cooper, 1998, p. 17).
- 4 The feminist theologian Rosemary Ruether (quoted in Soskice, 1992, pp. 86-87) appears to agree with

Cooper on this point; “One could speak of God as ‘Mother-Daughter-Spirit,’ but this language finds no home among the texts from which Christianity takes rise. . . .”

5 See Burger, 2006, pp. 172-173 for an explanation of these two groups of American Protestants.

6 It seems possible that the pronoun *him* has been consciously avoided in this reference to God, despite the CRC’s statement opposing inclusive language.

7 The evangelical scholar Mark L. Strauss (1998) counters with this observation from Edith Humphrey: Those who have been wounded by their fathers do not need to be told that “fathers are just like that.” They need to be assured that God’s fatherhood as revealed in Scripture can correct this gross distortion and that the Spirit of God can heal the damage that has been done. Humphrey continues, “In this time, of all times, this time of the absent father, and the overburdened super-woman, we need, men need, families need, the corrective image of the Father.”

8 A lectionary is “a fixed selection of readings, taken from both the Old and the New Testament, to be read and heard in the churches’ services of worship” (*An Inclusive-Language Lectionary*, 1988, p. 9).