

Article: God Declares His Pronouns: He/Him

No doubt you have heard it reported that the Anglican Church is considering how to refer to God without assigning a gender. This is in response to some clergy asking to use more inclusive languages in services. One feminist theologian has written, “If God is male, the male is god.” In other words, talking about the Christian God in exclusively masculine terms privileges men in society and underpins male dominance.

This type of thinking is nothing new. The confession that God is Father and has eternally begotten His only Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, has been criticised by feminist theologians as patriarchal and oppressive toward women because it uses masculine pronouns. Those who criticise the use of masculine pronouns for God or object to the Bible’s own “gendered” language referring to God (Father, Son, Lord, King) suggest that these titles or names are merely the products of a patriarchal society. If one were charitably to grant such theologians that God, insofar as He is above creation, is neither male nor female, these theologians would nevertheless still deny God’s own self-revelation in Holy Scripture as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. They claim that traditional Christianity, influenced and shaped by patriarchal societies, is fundamentally flawed because it favours maleness and perpetuates sexism and the oppression of women.

How may Christians today respond to the charge that referring to God with masculine pronouns is sexist or even idolatrous?

Christians must be aware of some of the theological origins of feminist theology. It is not necessary to walk through all the historical developments of feminist theology in order to recognise what some feminist theologians presuppose about the Christian faith and about the Bible. They believe the Scriptures are a product of primitive societies, creations of patriarchal men and not of divine revelation. The text of Scripture, they argue, is not authoritative by itself, but needs to be interpreted according to the developments of a progressing society. Truth is relative according to different times and places, they argue. What was true in biblical times about men and women and God is not necessarily true for our time. Their denial of God as male arises not from some inherent lovelessness in Scripture about women, but from a denial of the true God and the Bible as God’s unchanging revelation. Simply put, feminist theology promotes false religion.

The most direct source of this false confession of God is, as far as I can tell, the 19th-century German philosopher and atheist, Ludwig Feuerbach (1804–1872). Feuerbach’s powerful influence on modern spirituality is often overlooked today. He taught that there is no study of theology from divine revelation since there is no God. Rather, theology can only study what human beings think about a “god” they have created. Feuerbach believed that God is nothing more than the psychological projection of an individual’s deepest desires. Hence, when someone studies religion, he is not studying God’s revelation in sacred texts but, rather, human beings and their developing beliefs. Theology, then, primarily tells us about people, not about God. For example, if someone thinks God is all-powerful, it is because that person lacks power and wishes to have that power in God. If someone feels unholy, he may find comfort in having a God who makes people holy.

If we understand with Feuerbach that religion is self-determined and not based on the reality within God Himself, then we can easily reimagine God according to our own ideology. Thus, for Feuerbach and for modern feminist theologians, our notion of God evolves with our desires, unrestricted by the words of Scripture. With this thoroughly relativistic view of truth, feminist theologians evaluate Scripture according to their own self-determined definition of God. They put gender equality, by which they mean life without gender distinction or restriction, at the centre of Christianity’s message. To put it bluntly, however, they have an imaginary god. Those who insist on contradicting God’s self-revelation in Scripture may very well believe that God exists, but they don’t know Him since they deny who He is and what He says of Himself. It is like Israel making a golden calf and Aaron saying that this is God who brought them up out of Egypt. It’s simply not who He is.

In response to these feminist readings of Scripture, Christians should be aware that the use of male pronouns is not merely a matter of personal preference or a haphazard accommodation of human language, but a necessary confession of the only true God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, both as He exists in Himself from eternity and as He has revealed Himself to us. We can only know who God is from His own self-revelation in Holy Scripture. He tells us who He is. To deny the use of male pronouns to refer to God is to deny God as He is and to sever oneself from the Christian church, which confesses and worships not only God as Father, but also confesses the eternal Sonship of Jesus Christ, who is “begotten from the Father before all worlds” (Nicene Creed). God is not merely Father as He relates to us as His children. He is eternally Father to the Son, and they are in perfect communion with the Holy Spirit, one God forever.

If we deny the maleness of God, we deny the personal union of the eternal Son with humanity. God was “made man” and is, by virtue of this union between God and man, male forever. To be a Christian is to worship God in the flesh. As St. John says, “*This is how you recognise the Spirit of God: Every spirit who confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God. However, any spirit who does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the Antichrist, which you have heard is coming and which is already now in the world*” (1 John 4:2–3). Because of the incarnation of our Lord, there can no longer be a discussion of God in the abstract; the Word became flesh (John 1:14). Feminist theology speaks of God apart from

Scripture as God's revelation of Himself and in abstraction from Jesus Christ, who has come in the flesh as a man to redeem all humanity by His death and resurrection.

Christians, male or female, do not conceive of God's becoming man as an injustice against women. Scripture simply teaches that God the Son became man, born of the Virgin Mary to redeem all mankind, male and female alike (see Luke 2:1-7, 21). God the Father has revealed Himself through His Son and saved us through His Son so that in His Son we might receive the inheritance of sons. The inheritance of sons is given us through Holy Baptism, in which God the Holy Spirit makes us all sons of God by faith. That is why St. Paul writes: *"Moreover, because you are sons, God has sent out the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, the Spirit who cries, "Abba! Father!" Therefore, you are no longer a slave but a son. Moreover, since you are a son, you are also an heir, through God"* (Gal. 4:6-7).

Feminist theologians who refuse to use the masculine pronouns are missing out on truly knowing God and His salvation. They create a religion based on Feuerbach's model of religion as self-projection and miss what the true, living and incarnate God has done to redeem all humanity. Christians, who know the God of the Scriptures, are called to bear witness to the truth with their lives, their marriages, their confession of the Holy Trinity and the person and work of Christ, and their trust and confidence in God's Holy Word.

In love, we should bear witness to those who promote feminist theology, knowing that those who do so don't know the God of Scripture. We are called to introduce Him to them, as for the first time. Surely there is much more that can be said about the masculinity of God as it pertains to the redemption of His Bride, the church, and the role of men and women made in His image. Concerning the masculinity of God, however, it is of the first order to hear our Lord say, "It is written" and take Him at His word.