

## Comment: God's Sex Or Gender

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Many theologians have claimed that there is a radical difference between God and all creatures, including us. Others, anxious to reject that claim, have often appealed to Genesis 1:26-27: 'Then God said, "Let us make human kind in our image and according to our likeness" ... So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them' (NRSV).

How should we understand this text? We cannot be images of God as portraits of Queen Victoria are images of her. Such portraits are flat and hung on walls, as we are not. But might we all still resemble God so as to be an image or likeness of God?

If we think of God as a non-bodily mind with various thoughts that succeed each other in time, we might find it easy to suppose that we all resemble God if we also suppose that this is what each of us is (a non-bodily mind with various thoughts that succeed each other in time). But are we really disembodied minds? Are we not, rather, beings with flesh and blood who *also* have various psychological powers? And does it make sense to think of God as a 'mind' without a body? What would such a 'thing' be?

Perhaps we should say that people resemble God since most of them are able to understand and to act with freedom. And this view is a very traditional and sensible one (cf. *Summa Theologiae*, 1a, 93,6). But some would argue that males resemble God better than females, and one can see why they might think that since Biblical texts regularly portray God as male. In the Bible, God is a father, a husband, a king, a lord, a judge, a shepherd, and so on. There are biblical passages which pull in a different direction. One example is Isaiah 42:14: 'I have kept still and restrained myself; now I will cry out like a woman in labor; I will gasp and pant' (cf. Isaiah 66: 13, Hosea 11:3-4, Matthew 23:37 and Luke 13:34). Still, it remains that the Bible most typically talks about God as if God were male.

On the other hand, though, biblical authors uniformly agree that God is not a bodily thing, that God, considered as the Creator of the universe, is incorporeal. Even the Gospel of John, with its strong talk about Jesus being truly *human* and truly *divine*, insists that the *divine nature* is not something bodily (cf. John 4:24). Therefore, and whatever imagery they use when referring to God, biblical authors cannot be taking God to be literally either male or female. So, presumably, neither should we. Any reference to God as male or female is metaphorical and has to fall short of capturing what God really

is, as do all our attempts to capture God in any sentences we come up with.

Aquinas says that even what we truly say about God when speaking *literally* always ‘signifies imperfectly’ since we do not know what God is as we might, for example, know what a human being or a mouse is (cf. *Summa Theologiae*, 1a,13, 3). If Aquinas is right, then we have no special reason for preferring masculine as opposed to feminine ‘pictures’ of what God is and *vice versa*. It has been said that male imagery represents God better than female imagery since it suggests strength, leadership, and a source of life. And if that is what male imagery used of God is doing, it seems hard to object to it. But female imagery can also connote strength, leadership, and a source of life.

Some Christians have said that, since the Bible’s imagery for God is so predominantly male, we should conclude that divine *revelation* is *teaching* us that male imagery for God should be preferred to female imagery. The idea here is that God, in the Bible, is *positively telling us* about God’s *chosen* way for us to refer to or think about God (cf. the suggestion that if someone prefers to be referred to as ‘he’ or ‘she’, that person’s wishes should be respected). But, if people such as Aquinas are right, *both* male *and* female imagery ‘signify imperfectly’ when used as attempts to refer to God, and we might wonder whether the male imagery is seriously better than the female imagery. It has been suggested that if God is masculine or feminine at all, then God is *equally* masculine and feminine. If God is incorporeal, however, then God is *neither* masculine or feminine. You might say that being masculine or feminine has nothing to do with bodily existence. Yet what would it mean to say that something incorporeal (and not even a member of the human community) is masculine *or* feminine *or* both?

People sometimes say that sex should not be confused with gender. The idea here is that to use the words ‘male’ and ‘female’ is to employ ‘sex’ language, which should be distinguished from the ‘gender’ language found in the words ‘masculine’, ‘feminine’, ‘man’, and ‘women’. But ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ language is literally applicable only when it comes to people, considered as bodily individuals. So, why should we take it as relevant when it comes to our understanding of what God is if God is ‘the Maker of all things, visible and invisible’? Why not say straight out that ‘male’, ‘female’, ‘masculine’, ‘feminine’, ‘man’, and ‘woman’ are not terms that latch on to what God could possibly be, except metaphorically? The doctrine of the Trinity speaks of God the Father and God the Son. But this doctrine is not trying to describe the Trinity as if it were something subject to sexual or gender analysis. It is presenting a mystery while insisting that all that is *in* God, *is* God. It is not saying that the Father has features or properties that the Son lacks. It is flagging a relation between persons in the Trinity, one which cannot be literally understood in sexual or gender terms.

To caution against projecting sexual or gender distinction into God is, of course, compatible with using and profiting from images of God which suggest sexual or gender distinction. Even Aquinas holds that Holy Teaching (*sacra doctrina*) fittingly employs metaphorical or figurative language when speaking of God. He writes: ‘It naturally belongs to us to reach intelligible things through sensible ones, for all our cognition originates from the senses. It is, then, appropriate for sacred Scripture to teach spiritual things to us by means of metaphors drawn from bodily things’ (*Summa Theologiae*, 1a, 1,9). Yet the English language heavily depends on pronouns, notable among which are ‘he’, ‘she’, ‘his’, ‘her’, ‘himself’, and ‘herself’. So, should we employ any of these pronouns when talking or writing about God?

People differ in their answer to this question. Some say ‘Don’t use any of them: stick just to “God” and “Godself”’. Others say ‘Always prefer “he”, “his” and “himself”’. Some are happy only using ‘she’, ‘her’ and ‘herself’, while others have no problem alternating between ‘he’, ‘she’, ‘his’, ‘her’, ‘himself’, and ‘herself’.

It is hard to imagine defenders of these positions ever agreeing with each other. Happily, though, it *is* possible, albeit with some effort and care, to speak and write about God in decent English without recourse to ‘he’, ‘she’, ‘him’, ‘her’, ‘himself’, and ‘herself’. It is also possible to speak and write about God without constantly repeating the word ‘God’ in a single sentence and (with God’s help) without recourse to ‘Godself’. Inclusive language can be used without drawing attention to itself or misrepresenting what it is talking about.

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