

# Why call God the Father?

---

If there's one thing that the feminist movement has been successful at teaching us since the early 1970s, it is that it matters what you call things. Not only do thoughts shape words, but words shape thoughts. Thus, if our words are sexist, it is likely that our thoughts will also be. With all due apologies to Shakespeare: a rose may indeed *not* smell as sweet by any other name.

Nowhere is this more important than in the texts that Christians claim describe the heart of reality itself. As a child of the 1970s, I find myself constantly cringing whenever I hear the 1978 version of the NIV read these days, which quite unnecessarily translates gender-neutral Greek words as specifically masculine. The Greek word *anthropos* is actually better translated as 'humankind' or 'humanity' than 'man'. The revisions of the TNIV and the forthcoming 2011 NIV are very welcome.

But should this renovation of our language extend to the masculine terms for God? Should we drop the habit of praying to God as 'Father' in our personal and liturgical prayers and instead seek more gender-neutral terms like 'Creator'? Should we reconsider the masculine pronouns for God? In a recent writing project I was involved in, it was suggested to me that using 'him' and 'he' for God would cause widespread offence, and that I ought to avoid using pronouns for God at all. In academic theological writing, the unfortunate and unmusical word 'Godself' has appeared as a word to get theologians out of the problem of what to write instead of 'himself'. A friend of mine was recently told at a denominational gathering that his praying to 'Father God' had offended and insulted the women present.

Feminist theologians have argued that the maleness - and particularly the Fatherhood - of God have given sanction to habits of thought that lead to the abuse of women by men. Boston College's Mary Daly (1928 - 2010) coined the famous aphorism: 'If God is male, then male is God'. If only one gender is thought of as reflecting divinity, then what is implied about the dignity and status of the other gender? If so many people have had disastrous relationships with human fathers, isn't it simply adding insult to injury to insist that God is to be known as Father?

That's not much help if you are a Bible-reading Christian, since Scripture is shot through with masculine language for God. On this account, a number of feminist thinkers such as Oxford University's Daphne Hampson (b. 1944) have decided that Christianity is beyond redemption. Others, such as Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (b. 1938), have pointed out that the depiction of God in the Bible is not as uniformly male as we sometimes suppose. Indeed there are a number of instances

where God is described as having feminine and maternal characteristics. For example, in Isaiah 42:14 God says 'I will cry out like a woman in labour'. In the same prophecy (Is 49:15) we hear 'Can a woman forget her nursing child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you.' Then there are a number of times that God (or Jesus) is compared to a mother bird – most memorably in Jesus' lament over fallen Jerusalem in Mat 23:37: 'How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!'

Schüssler Fiorenza also points out that both the Hebrew and Greek words for 'wisdom' – *Hokmah* and *Sophia* – are in the feminine gender. In Proverbs 8, Wisdom herself speaks and tells us, in language strikingly like that used to describe the incarnation of the Son of God in the New Testament, that she was with God from the foundation of the world itself. Is this warrant for a feminisation of divinity? Or at least: shouldn't we move to a more gender neutral approach – with God as our Parent, or Father AND Mother?

It might sound like a reasonable development, but as the US theologian Elizabeth Achtemeier (1926-2002) argued "The church cannot and it must not accede to feminist demands that language about God be changed to feminine, for then the church will have lost that God in whom it truly lives and moves and has its being." Nothing less than the very identity of the God Christians claim to worship is at stake.

Not the least this is because genuine Christianity recognises that in Scripture we have not merely the record of some human impressions of their religious experiences but an actual revelation of God. The God of the two testaments is not merely a projection of human aspirations. The language about God that we read in those texts is not interchangeable with language we may find more soothing to our ears. On the biblical account, only God names God.

But when the Bible describes God using male terms like 'Father' it is not doing so because God is male. Mary Daly is just plain wrong: the Christian tradition never claimed God was male. God is Spirit, and does not have a body. Gender goes with having a body. A sexed body is what creatures need to reproduce – but not the Creator. The God of Scripture, in contrast to many of the pagan deities of the ancient world, does not copulate or procreate.

So why call him 'Father'? The nature and being of God is beyond the capacity of human understanding and cannot be completely captured in human language. Since the early Christian era, theologians have recognised that in speaking to us in Scripture God is 'accommodating' himself to us. That is to say, he reveals himself to us in such a way that we with our dim minds can 'get' him.

To communicate to us God uses metaphors about himself. He draws upon concepts familiar to us, and links them to himself. The name 'Father' is one of these: God is not a father in the way that male human beings are fathers. But that this language is metaphorical should not make us think that we can exchange the biblical metaphors for ones we would rather. The metaphors of the Bible are not just stylistic flourishes. They are the chosen vehicles of God's disclosure of himself to us. We cannot exchange these for others at our convenience without making an idol. A Christianity that refuses to call God 'Father' is something other than Christianity.

In the Old Testament, Israel came to know God as 'Father' because he had created and redeemed them as a nation. In Deuteronomy 32:6 Moses asks the people: 'Is not he your father, who created you, who made you and established you?' In Isaiah 63:16 and 64:8, the prophet appeals directly to the Fatherhood of God over Israel. That God is described as 'Father', and in almost in every other instance using masculine language, serves to distinguish him from the fertility cults of the nations surrounding Israel. But this masculinity was not a 'sexed' masculinity - unlike the other male gods, Israel's Lord did not take for himself a consort.

That is not to say that the feminine imagery that Schüssler Fiorenza and others have discovered isn't there. But it is interesting to note (and here the former English teacher in me comes out) that the feminine imagery for God is always applied as a *simile*. He is 'like' a mother in labour, or a mother eagle. He *is*, however, named as 'Father' (that's a metaphor). The association of God with maternal qualities, while certainly present, is indirect compared to the very close association of his identity with the concept of fatherhood. Achtemeier spoke of him as the 'maternally compassionate Father in Heaven' – he has maternal qualities, but he does not have a maternal *name*.

The name 'Father' that Christians use for their God is learnt from the way in which Jesus himself addressed God in prayer, and invited his followers to copy. The Fatherhood of God as far as the New Testament goes is learnt from the Sonship of Jesus. He is 'Father', not (of course) because he has male chromosomes but because 'Father' and 'Son' reveal to us the relationship between the two. This matters because it is by being united to Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit that we can speak of Jesus as our brother and, like him, address God as our Father (Romans 8:15-17). We do not know of God as Father merely by considering humans fathers we know on a grander scale. We know him as Father because of the life and example of the Son.

The concerns of those who plead that women are harmed by the language we use are not to be trivialised (as they sometimes are by evangelicals, I am afraid). We can certainly move to using inclusive language where possible in our translations and in our worship. But Christians are not at

liberty to alter the name of God on the basis of a changed social convention. Neither should we want to: the Fatherhood of God is the name that describes his clear word to us, his profound love for us and his determination to save us. How could we not love that name!