

Could Gender Be an Attribute of God?

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Abstract: This paper discusses whether gender can be considered an attribute of God, examining Biblical depictions of God in masculine terms alongside modern egalitarian concerns within the context of Abrahamic religious traditions, particularly focusing on Catholic tradition in Christianity. One of the key questions that I address is if attributing gender to God conflicts with the *imago Dei* doctrine that says all humans equally bear the divine image. I argue that there is a conceptual *gap* between God's full attributes and those relevant to the human embodiment of the *imago Dei*. I argue that God's gender does not determine attributes within the *imago Dei*—that God's gender *can* be image-irrelevant. This distinction allows for harmonizing the traditional view of God's gender with the perfect being theology and egalitarianism. Men and women can be equal image-bearers of a gendered God if God's gender is not a constitutive part of the image. Furthermore, I give an argument as to why God's gender *cannot* be an image-relevant attribute, even if God is equally gendered or non-gendered. Because if God is gendered or nongendered and God's gender is image-relevant, then the people who have both genders or none, would be respectively greater and inferior image-bearers of God.

Keywords: *imago Dei*, feminism, traditionalism, genderism, egalitarianism, perfect being, masculine.

Introduction

Traditionalism holds that the pattern of characterizing God in primarily masculine gendered terms is theologically mandatory (Rea, 2016). Genderism holds that Gender is a divine attribute and it is not the case that God belongs equally to all genders (Ibid). Does anyone affirm genderism? Only a few theologians explicitly advocate for genderism in relation to God. While it is often asserted that Christian tradition maintains that God transcends gender, a more nuanced examination of the relevant texts reveals that they primarily assert God's transcendence over physical sex rather than gender. As Rea notes, it is challenging to find

theological support for the idea of God having a specific gender, though the interpretation of the texts is often limited to discussions of sex rather than broader gender categories. (Cooper 1998, pp.168-169).¹

Even though there may not be explicit theological endorsements of a gendered God, religious iconography that consistently depicts God—and particularly the members of the Holy Trinity—as male highlights the dominance of masculine imagery throughout church history (Rea, 2016). This pattern does not necessarily suggest that the prevailing theological *view* has been that God is intrinsically male, but it does indicate a longstanding tradition in *representation*. Robert

¹ See also Hook & Kimel, 2001.

Jenson (1992) argues that there is no linguistic or metaphysical justification to interpret Jesus' reference to God as 'Father' metaphorically. He further asserts that, during the Arian controversies of the fourth century, the Church determined that the use of 'Father' was not only literal but also preferable to feminine or neutral designations (ibid., p.105). Furthermore, Hook and Kimel write "At least as far as the grammar is concerned, the original hearers and readers of the Scriptures would have understood their God as no more and no less male than we English speakers do today when we read contemporary translations of the Scriptures or hear God spoken of as "he" from the pulpit." (Hook & Kimel, 2001, p.73) Hook and Kimel defend the view that God as portrayed in the Scriptures is a masculine-gendered God. Additionally, about the depiction of God in the Old Testament, Mankowski (2001) argues that YHWH's fatherhood is the linchpin of his gender identification and marks him as definitively masculine.²

Michael Rea has objected to traditionalism that "it is not more accurate to characterize God as masculine rather than feminine" (Rea, 2016). Rea argues that if God is understood as being unequally gendered, this would force us to either compromise our egalitarian intuitions regarding the equality of men and women as bearers of God's image or our belief in God as a perfect being. However, I would argue that it is possible to conceive of God as unequally gendered without undermining any of the following: traditionalism (which has been a historically revered framework for understanding and speaking about God for millennia), our egalitarian principles, the concept of the image of God, or the notion of God's perfection. In the

² For extended discussion of the masculine image of God in the Biblical language see: Frymer-Kensky (1992, pp. 187-89), Achtemeier (1992, pp. 1-16), Smith (2002, pp. 137-148), Frye (1998, pp. 17-43), Mankowski (1992, pp. 151-76), Arnold (1991, pp. 200-215)

³ I will return to this aspect of the problem at the end of this

following, I will explore the historical context and significance of this issue before engaging further with Rea's argument.

Two Faces of the Problem:

Sociolinguistic vs Metaphysical

The problem of God's gender can be approached from various perspectives, depending on the context. Let us distinguish the sociolinguistic problem of God's gender from the metaphysical one. The sociolinguistic problem is about how social contexts in which the scriptures were related to the immediate audience could be a decisive factor in the wording and development of the texts; and whether God's and people's gendered preferences can be compromised due to social contingent facts later when social norms alter or not.³ How the traditional preference to refer to God in masculine terms has led to the subordination of women in the church is also related to this aspect of the problem.

The socio-linguistic problem requires a socio-linguistic explanation. An instance of such an explanation is the explanation from symbolic interactionism⁴ according to which, as Carrothers puts it, "human beings engage in social action on the basis of meanings acquired from social sources, including their own experience. These meanings, which are communicated to others using symbols (especially spoken language), are both learned from others and to some extent shaped by those using the symbols. As humans learn and use symbols and develop meanings for objects in their environments, they develop a "mind" that is both reflecting and

text.

⁴ The most well-known theoreticians of symbolic interactionism are Cooley (1902), Blumer (1986), Burke (1980, 1991), McCall and Simmons (1978), Mead (1934), Goffman (1959, 1961, 1963), and Thomas and Thomas (1928).

reflexive. Humans are both actors and reactors, shaped and shapers, definers of social reality and defined by social reality. Thus, the human sense of "self" is product and process, as the self is simultaneously shaped by the larger society helping to shape that same entity" (Carrothers, 2003).

From the perspective of symbolic interactionism, the distribution of social roles in a patriarchal society interacts with gendered language and references. The way in which we refer to individuals shapes their roles, and these roles, in turn, influence how we refer to them and interpret their roles. The meaning of an individual's role within society, and the roles society assigns to different individuals, affect their patterns of social engagement and experience. This echoes the idea that individuals are both participants and respondents, simultaneously shaped by society and shaping it. In a patriarchal context, this dynamic reinforces traditional gender roles, and the language used to describe them, creating a cycle where gendered language both reflects and perpetuates societal structures.

When the concept of God is introduced into such a society, social sources begin to attach symbols to it. If God is initially defined as a perfect and supreme power, society is likely to assign symbols to God that correspond with the source of power within that society— typically male in a patriarchal context. Once the supreme takes the masculine roles, this would impact women's social roles and experiences as well. Consequently, when the church comes into existence, women are introduced into it as those who do not bear the symbols of God to the same extent as men do, which affects their role within the

church and relegates them to a subordinate status.⁵

The sociolinguistic aspect of the problem is also related to traditional sociolinguistic norms interfering and conflicting with contemporary notions of gender norms. The predominance of masculine imagery and terminology for God in the Biblical texts reflects the influence of the ancient Israelite cultural milieu on early conceptions of the divine nature. As Israelite religion developed amidst a polytheistic environment dominated by male deities, this established an antecedent cultural bias towards perceiving the divine through the lens of masculinity.⁶ God's depiction as a powerful warrior and king mirrored the hierarchical and patriarchal norms of Israelite society, while fatherhood and marital metaphors aligned with structures of authority in families and households.

Roland de Vaux, in his seminal 1958 (and 1960) work *Ancient Israel*, asserts that "there is no doubt that... the Israelite family is patriarchal," describing men as masters of their wives with absolute authority over their children, including at times the "power of life and death." Writing in 1967, anthropologist Raphael Patai likewise, in his study of the ancient Israelite family, points out the idea of patriarchy in and the role of the father as ruler of the family. This perspective is echoed in major biblical reference works of the period, including the 1976 *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* which refers to the "patriarchal family" ruled by paternal authority.⁷ Likewise, the 1974 *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* describes the father's "almost unlimited authority" in the ancient Israelite family.⁸ About the Israelite image of God, Hook and Kinel (2001, p.70) write "In the literary and narrative

⁵ It is also notable that the translation of the scriptures can influence the conception of God in the destined language and thereby social dynamics and role distributions and the meaning of the roles. To see how translation might impact the image of God in a language see Mankowski (2001, p. 35). For instance, he writes in the Hebrew of Psalm 119 alone, there are

338 instances in which an explicitly masculine reference to God is necessarily neutralized in the English translation. (Ibid)

⁶ See Green (2003, ch4) for the influence of the patriarchal period on the conception of Yahweh.

⁷ O. J. Baab, "Family," IDB 2:238, 240.

⁸ Helmer Ringgren, "אָבִיחַ" TDOT 1:8.

portrayal of divinity presented in the Scriptures, the gender of the God of Israel is unquestionably and unashamedly masculine. While it is true that grammatical gender does not necessarily indicate sexual identity, the correspondence in fully gendered languages between gender classification and the sex of personal beings is, we recall, broad, general and usual. More significantly, the principal titles, names, and metaphors used to portray this God are also masculine. God is Father, King, Shepherd, Judge, Husband, Master.”

The influence of sociological theory, notably Max Weber’s seminal 1921 (published in Germany) work *Economy and Society*, expanded the use of the term patriarchy in biblical scholarship to connote society-wide male dominance. Weber’s theories have heavily influenced the Hebrew Bible scholarship. Martin Noth’s influential 1950 work *The History of Israel (Geschichte Israels)*, for instance, asserts that Israelite society was patriarchally ordered under the father’s power (*patria potestas*). Subsequent studies such as Norman Gottwald’s 1979 work, *Tribes of Yahweh*, characterize ancient Israelite society, culture, and semantics as being “pervasively patriarchal.” Meyers (2014) underscores that many scholars continued to utilize patriarchal models to portray the ancient Israelite family, well into the late 20th and early 21st centuries. This trend is evident in works like Philip J. King and Lawrence E. Stager’s *Life in Biblical Israel* (2001), and the 2003 *Dictionary of the Old Testament*⁹, both of which affirm the dominance of paternal authority in an ancient Israelite family. Current biblical scholarship still retains hints of traditional patriarchal models through the continued use of terms like

paterfamilias. The default use of masculine pronouns and imagery for God in the Israelite society followed standard grammatical conventions rather than necessarily carrying theological import. God’s covenantal relationship with Israel, framed in spousal terms with Yahweh as a husband, also drew upon common customs surrounding marriage and kinship. Ideas regarding fertility from neighboring religious traditions further contributed to masculine metaphors for God’s generative and creative capacities (see Green 2003, p.257). The conceptual terrain was also shaped by the dominance of male priests and prophets, whose visions of the divine were expressed in masculine ideation.

As discussed thus far, the gendered language used for God in the Old Testament was conditioned by the patriarchal and androcentric norms of ancient Israelite society, culture, and semantics. While this resulted in a predominance of masculine imagery, the diverse feminine metaphors for God resist narrowly gendered interpretations. This resistance is partially grounded in the scriptures as well. In the Biblical language, God is also depicted in various feminine terms, including mother¹⁰, mother hen¹¹, a woman in labor¹², nursing mother¹³, having virtues like compassion¹⁴, tenderness¹⁵, care¹⁶, love¹⁷, in addition to having feminine beauty¹⁸ and grace¹⁹. Thus, the cultural-linguistic influence on Biblical divine depiction in masculine terms might not be intended to exclude equally valid feminine attributes. However, the dominance of masculinity by the passage of time subordinated women and situated them in the church as the second gender, which finally induced some philosophical resistance against this dominance in the 20th century.

⁹ (Arnold & Beyer, 2003).

¹⁰ Isaiah 66:13

¹¹ Matthew 23:37 & Luke 13:34

¹² Isaiah 42:14

¹³ Isaiah 49:15

¹⁴ Hosea 11:3-4

¹⁵ Isaiah 42:3

¹⁶ Isaiah 49:15

¹⁷ Isaiah 66:13

¹⁸ Psalms 36:7

¹⁹ Psalms 90:17

The feminist scholar Mary Daly famously has proclaimed, "Fortunately, in our time, the problem can be described more directly and unequivocally: I would say that sexist conceptualizations, images, and attitudes concerning God, spawned in a patriarchal society, tend to breed more sexist ideas and attitudes, and together these function to legitimate and perpetuate sexist institutions and behavior. Briefly, if God is male, then the male is God" (Daly, 1985, p.38). She in her 1973 work adds "the biblical and popular image of God as a great patriarch in heaven, rewarding and punishing according to his mysterious and seemingly arbitrary will, has dominated the imagination of millions over thousands of years. The symbol of the Father God, spawned in the human imagination and sustained as plausible by patriarchy, has in turn rendered service to this type of society by making its mechanisms for the oppression of women appear right and fitting. If God in "his" heaven is a father ruling "his" people, then it is in the "nature" of things and according to divine plan and the order of the universe that society be male dominated ... within this context a mystification of role takes place: the husband dominating his wife represents God "himself." (Daly, 1973). This critique encapsulates a key insight of second-wave feminist theology-- that predominantly masculine conceptions of God have helped justify the subordination of women within the Christian tradition.²⁰ If God exemplifies masculinity, and masculinity holds privileged status, then women associated with femininity become

secondary.²¹

In response, feminist theologians starting in the 1960s-1970s rigorously analyzed gendered God imagery. They distinguished biological sex from socio-cultural gender and drew on interdisciplinary insights to disentangle the two. Gradually, expanding theological conceptualizations of God beyond restrictive masculine norms became imperative for promoting egalitarian worldviews.²² Although facing resistance, feminists increasingly succeeded in introducing plurality and inclusion into notions of the divine. They highlighted feminine aspects of God while recognizing that the sacred ultimately transcends human gender categorizations.²³ However, the belief that God transcends any categorization, including gender, has been present in all the three major monotheistic traditions predating the 1960s, Christian feminists sought to highlight this view in order to resist against the perceived religious patriarchy.

Feminist theologians have employed diverse strategies to conceptualize God in ways that transcend masculinity. One approach as mentioned earlier, emphasizes feminine metaphors and imagery for the divine found implicitly in scripture and theology. Phyllis Trible (1978) and Elizabeth Johnson (1992, 1999, 2007) have highlighted God's maternal and amorous personae. Some propose new titles and pronouns, like "God/dess" and "Godself," (Ramshaw 1998, p.198-199) to avoid the limits of

²⁰ See Schussler (1983), Trible (1978), Johnson (1992)

²¹ Another feminist camp called ecofeminism criticizes the environmental consequences of subordination of women which is partially caused by the masculine imagery of God. Ecofeminism argues that the patriarchal ideologies that justify the subordination of women also drive a specific style of environmental exploitation. It suggests that in taking steps toward a more equitable and sustainable world, the dual liberation of women and nature is a necessary step. Changing the masculine metaphors by which we think and refer to the

nature is a step toward restructuring human cognition of the nature and environment. From ecofeminism's perspective, a rethinking of religious narratives and symbolism, including the perception of the divine, is a potential pathway to challenge both gender and environmental injustices. See Adams (2010 & 1993).

²² Making this distinction per se does not entail that God is not gendered. Genderists may still hold the classic belief that God is beyond sex but is also gendered.

²³ See Christ (1998), Ruether (2005),

masculine nomenclature.²⁴ Another tactic conceives God as equally encompassing both stereotypically masculine and feminine qualities or reconceptualizes the Trinity to incorporate feminine persons alongside the traditional masculine ones.²⁵

Rather than definitive gender traits, feminist scholars often associate God with non-gendered attributes including creativity, love, justice, and power. This shift focuses on qualities not limited by masculinity or femininity.²⁶ Many interpret ostensibly masculine God-language as symbolic rather than literal, recognizing it as a historical product of patriarchal cultures that should not constrain contemporary understandings. (McFague, 1982; Pinnock et al, 1994; Ruether, 1993) Relatedly, some employ apophatic or negative theology that describes God by what God is not, avoiding restrictive attributions. (Turner, 1995) Also, highlighting female biblical figures and their visions of the divine provides further inspiration for inclusive theology. Although the scope need not be limited to Biblical figures. There is an abundance of historical figures beyond the Biblical narratives that can also be considered.

On the other hand, the metaphysical aspect of the problem of God's gender focuses on whether attributing gender to God in a literal sense is

²⁴ As early as 1982, Sally McFague's "Metaphorical Theology" advocated moving beyond dominant male metaphors for God as king or father, highlighting feminine depictions like God as mother or lover that imply nurturing, empathetic qualities. Rosemary Radford Ruether's 1993 text "Sexism and God-Talk" contended that exclusively male pronouns and imagery for God have been employed to justify sexist structures, arguing mixed gender pronouns could help overcome such distortions. In her seminal 1992 work "She Who Is," Elizabeth Johnson provided an extensive analysis of the problems with predominantly masculine theological language and the necessity of balancing this imbalance with feminine and non-gendered speech about God. She noted titles integrating both genders like "God/dess" as one avenue for

philosophically coherent or appropriate for a divine being who transcends finite categories. As previously mentioned, this metaphysical lens provides a critical perspective, as issues in the socio-linguistic realm may derive from deeper metaphysical assumptions about gendered conceptions of the divine. In this paper, I will focus on this aspect of the problem of God's gender. Moreover, I will only focus on Michael Rea's argument in favor of the following thesis: "it is not more accurate to characterize God as masculine rather than feminine (or vice versa)". (Rea, 2016, p. 1) Nevertheless, Rea's conclusion does not automatically entail that traditionalism is false. A traditionalist might accept that a gendered language is not the most metaphysically accurate language yet consistently maintains that a gendered God-talk is theologically mandatory for some other reason.

A response to Traditionalism/

Genderism: Michel Rea Argues

In his article "Gender as a divine attribute", Michael Rea aims to object to theologically mandatory characterizations of God as predominantly masculine. A core motivation underlying Rea's analysis is to defend an account of divine gender

pluralizing the divine. Fundamentally, feminist theologians concur that challenging limited, authoritarian God-concepts perpetuated by male-only language is essential for promoting more egalitarian views of humanity and divinity alike.

²⁵ See Ramshaw (1995, 1996, 2000).

²⁶ One might object that we cannot escape society through language game alone and concepts like creativity, love, and justice might still carry with them gendered notions. While I agree that our engagement with and challenge of language norms still occur within a broader societal context, likely influenced by gendered norms, this doesn't render attempts to change the language game futile. It's unlikely that feminists view the shift in language as the only requisite for advancing an inclusive discourse about God.

that enables more gender-inclusive theological language. Rea notes that the predominant use of masculine terminology for God has posed significant and persisting obstacles to faith and full participation in religious communities for many people. Rea sees a strong theological warrant for metaphysical conceptions of God that allow for feminine and gender-neutral modes of divine representation. His sympathy towards egalitarian and feminist concerns leads Rea to develop an account of divine attributes that challenge mandatory masculine depictions of God. In this way, Rea's argument is driven by a desire to remove barriers to faith and religious life that the exclusive use of masculine language has erected (Schussler, 1983; Tribble, 1978; Johnson, 1992). Moving to more inclusive theological language, he suggests, can help restore access to the divine for those alienated by the traditional gendering of God.

Rea's argument rests primarily on an analysis of gender as a potential divine attribute, leveraging the *imago Dei* doctrine and the method of perfect being theology. Rea concludes that masculine depictions of God are no more accurate than feminine ones. He argues that "masculine characterizations of God are no more or less accurate than feminine ones." (Rea, 2016, p. 4) This challenges theological justifications for mandatory masculine language about God. His account principally rests on a set of principles that will be pointed out explicitly in the following:

Doctrine of Perfect Being (DPB): God possesses all perfections to the highest degree.

Rea's central thesis is that God is not most accurately characterized as masculine, nor as feminine. This conclusion is reached through the following premises: first, God would only be most

accurately characterized as masculine if God were masculine but not equally feminine. Second, God is masculine or feminine only if God is equally masculine and feminine. Thus, characterizing God as exclusively masculine cannot be most accurate. I call this argument *the main argument*.

In defending the second premise, Rea argues against "genderism", defined as the view that God possesses a gender that is either predominantly masculine or feminine. Note that Rea discusses gender as if it were binary for simplicity of expression/argumentation. Though Rea acknowledges that individuals might exhibit traits typically associated with the opposite gender, thus challenging stereotypical gender roles. His argument involves categorizing potential divine attributes as either essential or contingent, and intrinsic or extrinsic. Rea argues that strongly gendered attributes²⁷ could only be essential if each person of the Trinity equally exhibited that gender, otherwise the *imago Dei* doctrine would be compromised. Likewise, he holds that contingent divine attributes would conflict with God's nature and portrayal in Scripture. Therefore, Rea concludes, that genderism is false; God transcends gender categories. As mentioned, Rea's argument also relies on the *Imago Dei* Doctrine:

The *Imago Dei* Doctrine (IDD): we are created in the image of God (humans uniquely reflect God's nature and attributes).²⁸

The *imago Dei* doctrine implies humans share the image of God, regardless of their gender. The point that women and men alike bear God's image, plays a pivotal role here. Rea utilizes it, in addition to a few other principles, to undermine any divine asymmetry between masculinity and femininity.

²⁷ "Strongly gendered" terms refer to those attributes that are typically considered to pertain exclusively to one gender.

²⁸ Genesis 1:27, reads: "So God created man in his own image,

in the image of God created he him; male and female he created them."

Since the doctrine, in Rea's eyes, implies both genders reflect God's nature *equally*, Rea contends it provides grounds for denying any essential or intrinsic divine gendering. Otherwise, IDD would be compromised- which is a great cost to pay for rescuing traditionalism. Thereby IDD, alongside metaphysical analysis, allows Rea to deny genderism and defend his thesis that God transcends gender.

In conclusion, Rea leverages theology and metaphysics to argue against mandatory masculine depictions of God. His view avoids contentious divine transcendence or anti-realism, instead resting on the more widely accepted *imago Dei* doctrine. Thereby Rea provides a novel theological grounding for gender-inclusive language about God.

One might ask why would IDD be compromised, if God were essentially or purely masculine or feminine? By stating that IDD would be "compromised" if God were essentially or purely masculine or feminine, Rea means that such a view of God's gender attributes would undermine or be in conflict with the key theological teaching that both men and women *equally* bear the image of God. However, IDD (inspired from Genesis 1:27) does not necessarily indicate that men and women *equally* bear the image of God. The view that image-bearing entails equivalent divine representation in both men and women could be considered an egalitarian interpretation of IDD. However, it is also plausible to read Genesis 1:27 in a non-egalitarian way that does not assume identical manifestations of the divine image across male and female humanity. The biblical text alone does not definitively support absolute parity in how the *Imago Dei* is manifested between genders. Asserting IDD necessitates equivalent expression in men and women reflects a particular exegetical stance that goes beyond the Genesis passage's literal wording. In short, while equality of divine image-bearing can reasonably be read into Genesis 1:27 through an egalitarian lens, such equality cannot be

definitively proven from this passage alone when interpreted in isolation from other theological assumptions. Thus, Rea's reading of IDD has egalitarianism built into it. An egalitarian point of view about gender is of great importance in Rea's account. This could be put in the following way:

Doctrine of Equality (DE): both men and women equally reflect God's nature and bear God's image.

Rea takes IDD to directly imply a fundamental theological equality between women and men as image-bearers of God. However, the basic concept of IDD as expressed in Genesis 1 does not explicitly mention gender equality. This allows for multiple interpretations. Exegetically and historically, the ideas likely emerged separately rather than egalitarianism being "baked into" the *imago Dei* originally. So, it may be preferable to conceptually distinguish IDD from an egalitarian reading of this doctrine (DE). *Prima facie*, IDD as expressed in scripture does not necessitate an egalitarian interpretation. Egalitarianism represents an additional theological perspective that can be brought to bear when exegeting the biblical concept of humanity made in God's image. While IDD ascribes unique representative status to humans, egalitarian readings further emphasize the equal worth, dignity, and value of all people regardless of gender. Thus, IDD establishes human status as God's image-bearers, while egalitarianism specifically foregrounds the fundamental equality of women and men that this status entails. Separating these two aspects allows us to appreciate how each theological locus respectively contributes to a doctrine of humanity.

Rea's main line of reasoning is:

- 1- According to the *imago Dei* doctrine [plus DE], both men and women equally reflect God's nature and bear His image.

- 2- If God were inherently and exclusively masculine (or feminine), then men (or women) would reflect God's image to a greater degree than women (or men). Therefore, an essentially masculine (or feminine) God would imply men (or women) are superior image-bearers.

But this conclusion contradicts the *imago Dei* doctrine of equal status and value for both genders. In this sense, an essentially gendered God would "compromise" or undermine a core theological doctrine about humans being (equally) made in God's image. Rea sees this as problematic because the *imago Dei* doctrine is well-established in scripture and Christian tradition. Thus, he argues God cannot be inherently masculine or feminine, as this would compromise both God's perfection (DPB) and a cherished doctrine of human dignity (DE).

In the following, I will focus on an extended reconstruction of Rea's argument.

The *Imago Dei* Argument

Before presenting the *Imago Dei* Argument, it's crucial to define the terminology used in the reasoning, particularly the concept of "strongly gendered" attributes. Here, "strongly gendered" attributes refer to those attributes that are typically considered to pertain exclusively to one gender. For example, the term 'king' might be seen as applicable specifically to males under traditional gender connotations. On the other hand, "weakly gendered" terms, such as 'strong' and 'nurturing', may be associated with one gender but are not exclusive to that gender and can apply across genders. Rea defines his targeted views as the following:

Traditionalism: The belief that characterizing God primarily in masculine

terms is theologically mandatory.

Genderism: The view that God possesses a specific gender, not equally shared across genders.

His argument against traditionalism goes as follows:

- P1. Strongly gendered attributes are among God's essential attributes only if God belongs equally to each gender.
 P2. God has no contingent intrinsic divine attributes.
 P3. Strongly gendered attributes are among God's extrinsic contingent attributes only if God belongs equally to each gender.
 P4. If God has any strongly gendered attributes, they are among God's essential attributes, God's contingent intrinsic attributes, or God's extrinsic contingent attributes.
 C1. So, either God does not have any strongly gendered attributes, or God belongs equally to each gender.
 P5. If God does not have any strongly gendered attributes, then God has no gender.
 C2. So, either God has no gender, or God belongs equally to each gender.
 P6. If God has no gender or God belongs equally to each gender, then God is not most accurately described as masculine-gendered.
 P7.) If God is not most accurately described as masculine-gendered, traditionalism is false.
 C3. So, traditionalism is false.²⁹

In the following I will raise an objection to Rea's

²⁹ Special thanks to Kenneth Boyce for his reconstruction of

Rea's argument.

account and attempt to offer an alternative solution that upholds God's perfection, the *imago Dei* doctrine (IDD), doctrine of equality (DE), and traditionalism. My goal is to object to Rea's position and present a new perspective that does not compromise on the commitments to God's perfection, humanity bearing the *imago Dei*, gender equality, and historical consistency. I aim to articulate a position that coherently affirms the importance of these four key principles without sacrificing any of their integral values. The objection and alternative proposal to follow will be an exercise in constructive theological synthesis that integrates scriptural, philosophical, and feminist insights without forcing an either-or choice between them.—

An Objection to Rea's Image of the Image of God: A New Resolution

The core idea behind IDD is that humanity is created in the image and likeness of God - we reflect divine attributes in our own nature. This means there is a fragment of the divine within each human being; we embody a humanized manifestation of godly qualities.³⁰ Humans represent and mirror God, exemplifying some central aspects of the divine nature. However, IDD does not entail that all divine attributes are reflected in humanity. Also, it does not mean that all our ascriptions are godly ascriptions. Most understandings of IDD focus on human reflection of God's intellectual, spiritual, and moral facets. So, IDD does not require total reflection between human and divine ascriptions. Rather, humans in a limited way embody a subset of godly attributes essential to the image of God. Therefore, IDD allows that some divine ascriptions

are image-relevant, while others are image-irrelevant. If not all ascriptions of God are image-relevant, there is a *gap* between the antecedent and consequent of the following conditional statement:

The Gappy Conditional: If gender is a divine attribute, then it must be image-relevant.

The issue is that the antecedent proposes gender as a divine attribute, but the consequent does not necessarily follow from IDD. Since some divine attributes extend beyond the image-relevant subset embodied by humans, gender could hypothetically qualify as a divine ascription while not being part of humanity bearing the *Imago Dei*. *Omnipotence*, *omniscience*, *omnibenevolence* are essential intrinsic attributes of God that may not be part of the image. Also, *creatorship*, *Omnipresence in relation to creation*, and *mercifulness to the creation* are essential extrinsic attributes that may not be image-relevant. Moreover, *self-limitation in relation to creation* and *incarnation in a specific human* are related to contingent extrinsic properties that are not image-relevant as well as well.

The concept of the *imago Dei* (the image of God) highlights certain aspects of humanity that reflect God's essence, but it is crucial to recognize that not all human characteristics are shared with God. For example, to hold that individuals with disabilities are equally bearers of God's image as those without, we must acknowledge that physical or cognitive abilities do not determine one's likeness to God. If they did, this would imply a hierarchy based on bodily abilities among image-bearers, which would contradict the principles of God's justice and perfection.

³⁰ There is significant discussion among theologians and Biblical scholars regarding whether the doctrine of *imago Dei* implies that humans possess attributes similar to those of God. Ontic interpretations support this similarity, while functional

interpretations diverge, suggesting that to bear the *imago Dei* is merely to fulfill a specific role or function. Here my understanding is that Rea's view is easier to make sense when an ontic interpretation is assumed.

This perspective aligns with a broader theological understanding of the *imago Dei*, which holds that God's essence is reflected in humanity's moral and spiritual capacities rather than in physical or intellectual abilities. Mental disabilities, for instance, do not diminish the *imago Dei* because they are not dependent on cognitive capacities. Instead, the divine image is present in all individuals, emphasizing inherent dignity, relationality, and the capacity for love and moral discernment. This view rejects ableism, holding that every person, regardless of physical or mental abilities, fully bears the image of God. The *imago Dei* is understood as universally present in all aspects of human existence, focusing on relational and spiritual dimensions over specific abilities.

Moreover, once we accept that not all human attributes are reflected in the *imago Dei*, it follows that there is no guarantee a supposed human gender attribute would be relevant to the divine image. Similarly, even if God possessed a gender attribute, there is no necessity that it would manifest in the *imago Dei*. The connection between divine attributes and their reflection in humanity is not automatic. The gap between divine characteristics and those that are image-relevant means that gender, whether divine or human, may or may not be part of what it means to bear God's image. There is no inherent necessity linking a divine attribute of gender to its inclusion in the *imago Dei*.

Rea's argument hinges on the gappy conditional. He claims this would undermine DE or IDD, as it would make gender an image-relevant attribute, creating a hierarchy among image-bearers. However, the gappy conditional fails to reliably connect divine gender with undermining DE or DPB, as the gap in IDD severs this link. Divine gender attributes need not be image-relevant, making the gappy conditional an insufficient basis for claiming that God's gender would compromise DE or IDD. Rea does not seem to provide any good reason to bridge the gap. Without a justification for closing the gap

in the gappy conditional, there is no basis to necessitate divine gender attributes being *imago Dei* relevant. Therefore, we cannot presume divine gender characteristics must contribute to the *imago Dei* in humans. Rather, it is entirely plausible under the *imago Dei* doctrine that God could have a gender, yet that gender may not factor into the divine image.

In short, I'm arguing that there is conceptual room for God to have gender while that gender remains disconnected from and non-determinative for the *imago Dei*. The burden is now on Rea to argue otherwise. Without the gap being persuasively bridged, we cannot rule out the possibility of divine gender attributes that do not translate to *imago Dei*. This integrative approach enables concurrently upholding the richness of traditional theology, divine perfection, *imago Dei* dignity, and gender egalitarian values.

The gap would also let us spell out IDD more accurately.

IDD*: we are created in the image-relevant attribute of God.

Now that the gap is giving us a possibility to address our egalitarian concerns along with securing divine perfection without compromising on traditionalism, and that Rea's reason as to why gender cannot be a divine attribute is neutralized, let's see to which category of divine attribute(s) gender might belong. I assume that Rea is right that gender is neither an essential intrinsic nor an essential extrinsic attribute of God. Moreover, I accept that gender is not a contingent intrinsic attribute of God. I focus on his argument against gender being an extrinsic contingent attribute. In other words, I am targeting P3 of the *imago Dei* argument.

Gender as a Contingent Extrinsic

Attribute

Premise 3 of the *imago Dei* argument is to block the possibility that gender is a contingent extrinsic attribute. Rea defends this premise in the following way:

(1) God is extrinsically more masculine gendered than feminine gendered (or vice-versa) only if this fact about God is more grounded in God's external behaviors or ways of relating to people.

(2) God's external behaviors and ways of relating to people fail to ground the fact that God is more masculine-gendered than feminine-gendered or vice-versa [supported both by the equality thesis and various other aspects of the Christian Scriptures and tradition].

So, it is not the case that God is extrinsically more masculine-gendered than feminine-gendered (or vice-versa).

In defense of premise (2) Rea writes

"[t]o say that God belongs to both genders, however, is not yet to say that God belong equally to both genders. Perhaps God belongs to both genders but nevertheless has a preponderance of masculine attributes and therefore counts as more masculine than feminine. As noted earlier, however, to say this is to fall afoul of the equality thesis. Again: If every person of the trinity were more masculine than feminine, or if the divine nature were more masculine than feminine, or if the trinity as a whole were more masculine than feminine, then men as such would be greater image-bearers than women as such, contrary to the equality thesis" (Rea 2016, p:13)

Here Rea's position again relies on the problematic gappy conditional--- that if divine gender is extrinsic, it must be *imago Dei* relevant, contradicting DE. However, as I have previously argued, not all divine attributes, whether contingent or essential, are necessarily image-relevant. Consequently, God might possess masculinity or femininity as a contingent extrinsic attribute, without it being relevant to the divine image.

So far, I have argued why God *might* be gendered, given the possibility of gender being an image-irrelevant property. Note that I am not offering any argument against the view that the traditional pattern is theologically optional (feminism) and thereby the traditional pattern of characterizing God in predominantly masculine terms is theologically *mandatory (traditionalism)*. Rather I am arguing that a perfect God can possibly be unequally gendered (not necessarily male) and nonetheless humans are still equal image-bearers of that perfect God. The gap that I established can give a conceptual room for traditionalism to sneak in. In the following, I will go further than just arguing that gender *might* be image-irrelevant and will argue that gender *cannot* be an image-relevant attribute. However, this would block the version of traditionalism that holds God is gendered and gender is image-relevant, a weaker version of traditionalism that holds God is gendered but gender is not image-relevant can be immune to Rea's objections. This version of traditionalism is reconcilable to IDD, DPB, and DE.

Objection

One significant objection to the thesis that gender is not an image-relevant property of God arises from the textual evidence of Genesis 1:27, which states: "So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them." This passage ostensibly links the divine image explicitly with gender differentiation,

thereby suggesting that gender is not merely incidental but fundamentally constitutive of the *imago Dei*. Advocate of this interpretation may argue that the explicit mention of 'male and female' underpins a theological anthropology where gender is a divinely inscribed characteristic, reflecting essential attributes of the divine nature itself. This objection posits that to be created in God's image, as described in the foundational Biblical text, inherently involves gender distinctions that mirror divine properties, thus rendering gender an indispensable aspect of human resemblance to God.

Reply

As previously elucidated in the context of ancient Israelite society, the language employed in the Bible is attuned to the particular social conditions of its initial recipients. This observation suggests that the depiction of God in scriptural texts does not necessarily reflect divine attributes but is rather a strategic accommodation to the linguistic and cultural horizons of the audience. Irrespective of God's inherent attributes, the divine communication is tailored to ensure that it is comprehensible to human recipients. This adaptation can be analogized to an adult walking with a young child: even if the adult is capable of much faster speeds, they moderate their pace to align with the child's capabilities. The adult's choice to walk slowly does not reflect their usual pace or capability, but rather an accommodation to the child's limited speed. This methodological adjustment ensures that the divine message is accessible and meaningful to its audience.

However, it is important to note that the phrase "male and female he created them" in Genesis 1:27 can be interpreted as highlighting the comprehensive nature of humanity in bearing God's image rather than specifying gender as a divine

attribute. The mention of "male and female" emphasizes the inclusivity and totality of human beings created in God's image, encompassing all of humanity without elevating gender as a primary attribute of the divine nature. This perspective aligns with a broader theological understanding that the *imago Dei* refers to qualities such as relationality, moral capacity, and spiritual nature, which are shared by all humans regardless of gender. Therefore, while the text explicitly mentions gender, it possibly does so to stress the completeness of humanity's reflection of God's image, rather than to denote gender itself as a fundamental characteristic of the divine nature. This interpretation allows for a nuanced understanding that respects the textual evidence while maintaining that gender is not an indispensable aspect of the *imago Dei*. After all, given that the matter under consideration is profoundly metaphysical in nature, relying solely on textual arguments may not be the most effective method to counter opposing views.

The Magnitude of Human Diversity³¹

Here I will connect Rea's argument to an objection I term the Objection from Human Diversity. Briefly stated, this objection cites the thesis of Human Diversity (HD) which basically holds that humanity exhibits diversity in gender identity and expression.

HD: Some individuals identify as men, others as women, some reject gender categorization altogether, and still others adopt a fluidity or spectrum of gender identification.

Let's also restate C2 of the *imago Dei* argument:

C2. So, either God has no gender or God belongs equally to each gender.

³¹ I express my gratitude to Argon Gruber for our engaging

discussions and his beneficial ideas.

Let's break this disjunctive proposition into two propositions:

C2.1: God has no gender.

C2.2: God belongs equally to each gender.³²

For argumentative simplicity, let's stipulate the Gender Relevance Thesis (GRT) as the following:

GRT: Gender constitutes an *imago Dei* relevant attribute.³³

The argument proceeds thus:

Part#1

1. (HD, C2.1, and GRT) are all true.
2. If (HD, C2.1, and GRT) are all true, then men/women would be superior image-bearers compared to gender-fluid individuals, yet inferior to agender individuals.
3. If men/women would be superior image-bearers compared to gender-fluid individuals, yet inferior to agender individuals, then ED is false.
4. But ED is not false.
Therefore, (HD, C2.1, and GRT) are NOT all true.

Part#2

- 1*. (HD, C2.2, and GRT) are all true.
- 2*. If (HD, C2.2, and GRT) are all true, then men/women would be superior image-

bearers compared to agender individuals, yet inferior to gender-fluid individuals.

3*. If men/women would be superior image-bearers compared to agender individuals, yet inferior to gender-fluid individuals, then ED is false.

4*. But ED is not false.

Therefore, (HD1, C2.2, and GRT) are NOT all true.

From part#1 and part#2, we learn that switching from C2.1 to C2.2 (which is basically the opposite of C2.1) does not change the truth value of the conjunction. Therefore, one of the other conjuncts has to be false. HD seems to be plausible. The only remaining option is GRT. So, GRT is what makes the conjunct false. In other words, it is not the case that gender constitutes an *imago Dei* relevant attribute.

Rea argues that God must lack gender or encompass all genders because singular masculinity/femininity would conflict with equal *imago Dei* status across humanity. However, Rea's overlooking human gender diversity undermines this stance. Per HD, some individuals are agender while others exhibit gender fluidity. If divine-human gender matching signifies *imago Dei* relevance (GRT), those individuals would image God to lesser/greater degrees, violating DE. Thus, Rea's premises implicitly deny HD's attestation of multifaceted human gender identities, generating internal tension regarding DE and GRT.

If divine gender lacks *imago Dei* relevance, how would God possessing gender inherently contradict egalitarian ideals or divine perfection? The *gap*, along with the present argument, reveals conceptual space to concurrently uphold traditional divine

³² Surely it is not possible for both C2.1 and C2.2 to be true or false. at most one is true.

³³ One reason to think that God's gender is image-relevant is that, intuitively, gender is intimately connected with human personality traits, and it shapes a person's general way of being

in the world and relating to others. It is plausible to think that things this intimately connected to the human condition would be relevant to the divine image. (Rea, personal correspondence)

gender attributions, DE, IDD*, and DPB. Accepting gender as an image-irrelevant attribute loosens presumed clashes between these commitments, facilitating systematic reconciliation.

Rea's error was that, when he assumed for the sake of simplicity that gender is binary, he overlooked the fact that gender's being binary does *not* entail that the gender binary is exclusive or exhaustive. Even if there are only two genders available for people to be, that does not mean every person is one or the other gender in the sense that some might be both. It also doesn't mean that every person is one or the other in the sense that some might be neither. The important moral takeaway from all this is that it is crucially important to be cognizant of marginalized communities.

Finally, one might query how I would reconcile the application of strongly feminine terms to God by theologians such as Julian of Norwich. My response would be that God could potentially be gendered unequally, and in such cases, the use of these terms would be coherent. As Rea articulates, "[t]o say that God belongs to both genders, however, is not yet to say that God belongs *equally* to both genders. Perhaps God belongs to both genders but nevertheless has a preponderance of masculine attributes and therefore counts as *more masculine than feminine*. As noted earlier, however, to say this is to fall afoul of the equality thesis." As I have posited, I do not need to compromise on ED if I accept the potentiality of God being unequally gendered. For God might be gendered without the unequal distribution of gendered attributes being pertinent to the divine image.

After all, I admit that even with these conditions, the perception that God possesses a masculine identity could inadvertently suggest that men are more closely aligned with the divine than women. Human nature, with its tendencies towards bias and stereotype, might then allow this perception to subtly, perhaps inevitably, influence community

behaviors and attitudes. This could manifest in ways that inadvertently reinforce gender disparities, potentially leading to women feeling a diminished connection to the divine. Thus, while the separation of divine gender from human imaging aims to mitigate conflicts and promote inclusivity, the deeply ingrained sociolinguistic patterns, and their psychological impacts could perpetuate inequalities, challenging the integrity of egalitarian commitments within the community.

Conclusion

I tried to elucidate some insights regarding whether gender *can* constitute a divine attribute. I argued that the *imago Dei* doctrine does not necessitate all God's attributes being equally reflected in humanity. There exists a conceptual *gap* between the full scope of God's attributes and those constituting human reflection of the divine image. Consequently, God's hypothesized gender does not inherently determine gender attributes within the *imago Dei*. I argued that God's metaphysical gender and humanity's manifestation of the divine image may remain distinct. Thereby, space emerges for conceiving God as unequally gendered without conflicting with modern egalitarian ethics or central theological doctrines like the *imago Dei* and the perfection of God. This nuanced analysis charts a middle path between reactionary gender essentialism and radical deconstruction. This paper has outlined fertile avenues for reimagining God-talk, upholding the richness of creedal heritage while expanding the circle of belonging. By acknowledging the complexity of gender issues and eschewing facile assumptions, space opens to integrate tradition, scripture, philosophy, and lived experience.

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