

God is not male<sup>1</sup>

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Wittgenstein once wrote, “The limits of my language are the limits of my world.”

Language is a powerful tool. It can be used both for good and for ill in shaping the world, and for how we understand it. It is no surprise, then, that linguistic power is emphasized in religious thought. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, God speaks the world into being. One of Adam’s first God-given tasks is to name the living creatures. The name of God is so important that one of the ten commandments prohibits taking the Lord’s name in vain. Since language matters, it is also appropriate to ask what kind of language we should use to talk about God. Should God be called Father? Mother? May God be called She? How these questions ought to be answered depends, in part, on the answer to a prior question. That is, how should we conceive of God?

Contemporary feminist theologians have been challenging traditional, masculinized, conceptions of God for decades. Mary Daly’s revolutionary *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women’s Liberation* was first published in 1973. Of course, they are not alone. Julian of Norwich, for example, wrote of “God our Mother” as early as the 14<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, masculinized conceptions of God maintain a dominant foothold in Western religious thought. A survey conducted in 2013 by The Harris Poll found that more Americans believe that God is male (39%), than believe God is female (1%), or that God is neither male nor

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<sup>2</sup> *Revelations of Divine Love*

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female (31%), combined.<sup>3</sup> Even among those who believe that God is strictly neither male nor female, it's exceedingly common to understand God as masculine – to represent God as Father, to believe God to be revealed as “He,” to think of God as King, but not Queen, and so on. In this paper, I argue that this is a mistake -- conceiving of God as male (whether exclusively or primarily) is both practically and epistemically harmful. Justice and truth are ineluctably related. To the extent that masculine conceptions of God promote injustice and inequality, they also mislead.

In a piece published in 1993 by *Christianity Today* titled “Why God is Not Mother,” Elizabeth Achtemeier argues that Christians should resist feminizing language used to describe God because only a masculinized understanding of God insulates us against the error of conflating creator with creation. Understood as “he,” God can be recognized as transcendent and holy; understood as “she,” we might mistakenly believe that creation comes from the same substance as God. Achtemeier writes, “it is that holiness, that otherness, that transcendence of the Creator that also distinguishes biblical religion from all others. It is precisely the introduction of female language for God that opens the door to such identification of God with the world, however. If God is portrayed in feminine language, the figures of carrying in the womb, of giving birth, and of suckling immediately come into play. . . if the creation has issued forth from the body of the deity, it shares in deity’s substance. . .”<sup>4</sup> It might seem bizarre to associate the relationship of fatherhood with a distinctive biological distance that fails to attach to motherhood given that both men and women contribute biological matter to the reproductive process, but twenty years later, in 2013, Simon Chan would make the same argument in a piece titled “Father

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/americans-belief-in-god-miracles-and-heaven-declines-236051651.html>

<sup>4</sup> p. 20

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Knows Best.” Chan writes, “Calling God Mother undermines the Christian doctrine of creation by implying that God and the world are made of the same stuff and virtually indistinguishable.”<sup>5</sup>

In these kinds of arguments against the permissibility of referring to God in feminine terms, we see two lines of reasoning frequently offered alongside one another. First, that maintaining the tradition of God as “He” is of paramount importance because, among other reasons, thinking of God as mother is bound to confuse us with respect to all sorts of doctrines (transcendence, creation, revelation and so on); and second, that in another way, whether we think of God as masculine or feminine has very little practical import – women are not *really* excluded by the masculinization of God, and so reconceptualizing the divine gender will not genuinely advance women’s interests. For Achtemeier, the use of inclusive language for God moves beyond “feminism as fairness” to “feminism as ideology.” Chan argues that because God is referred to in masculine terms while sometimes conveying stereotypically feminine qualities (e.g., as exhibiting “deep compassion”), women are not excluded by representations of God as male.<sup>6</sup> These two lines of reasoning are in tension with one another. The gendering of God bears on our understanding of religious doctrines precisely because associating the divine with the masculine shapes our religious concepts, and so religious thought and social practice. To the extent that religion is an organizing force in our epistemic lives, it will also shape how we understand gender more broadly. In the words of Elizabeth Johnson, “The symbol of God functions.”<sup>7</sup>

When I was young teenager, I was having a disagreement with someone from my church. I don’t recall anymore what it was about, but I do remember that as I was explaining why I

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<sup>5</sup> *Christianity Today*, July/August 2013

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49

<sup>7</sup> *She Who Is*, p. 5

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disagreed with them, they interjected to say I was going to have a very difficult time finding a husband someday. When I asked why, they laughingly replied that it was going to be hard to find a man who is smarter than me. This was not meant as an insult. It was seemingly intended as a genuine and good-humored compliment to my intelligence. At the time, I was more interested in whether I was right than whether I would ever get married, never mind to whom. Nonetheless, it stuck with me. It was alienating. The presupposition that in virtue of being female my appropriate, or most fulfilling, relationship to men is one of intellectual inferiority was totally discordant with my experience, and yet the view seemed to flow so naturally from my religious environment. As the Christian scriptures say, the husband is the head of the wife, just as Christ is the head of the church.

I share this story, in part, because it's not particularly remarkable. It's the sort of experience, I'd venture, most women who have spent any amount of time in a Western religious community have had at one point or another, if not many times over (maybe others as well). The associations of femininity with various forms of inferiority, and of masculinity with divine authority, are so infused in our culture that expressions of those associations are quite ordinary. Gendered associations make a difference not just in how we conceptualize God, but in how we conceptualize ourselves and our relationships to one another. If maleness is, in general, understood to involve a normative superiority, talent and intelligence in women is no longer strictly a gift, but an aberration. We might recognize particular women as talented, intelligent, or creative and yet still fail to recognize that those women are able to engage in meaningful and authentic relationships with men who are less talented, less intelligent, or less creative in ways that promote mutual flourishing. The subordination of women is rationalized and enabled by a

conceptual framework that takes masculinity, but not femininity, to appropriately represent divinity at its normative center.

Importantly, conceptualizing God as exclusively, or primarily, masculine promotes injustice in more ways than one. First, men and women are harmed when gender hierarchies are enacted and upheld. Women are relegated to a second-class status and men have responsibilities and expectations foisted upon them that may not promote the fulfillment of their potential or be reflective of their best interests. Think, for example, of how a court might respond to a father's request for custody in the face of a cultural expectation that care-giving is properly a feminine role, or the increased risk of death for men when women are protected from the military draft even when they are capable of service. But second, conceptualizing God as masculine also does us an injustice as epistemic agents. It inhibits our ability to develop a normative framework that promotes human understanding and flourishing.

Here, Miranda Fricker's notion of hermeneutical injustice may be helpful. Fricker defines hermeneutical injustice as: "The injustice of having some significant area of one's social experience obscured from collective understanding owing to hermeneutical marginalization."<sup>8</sup> What we can know, indeed, what we can even think about, is dependent upon the concepts we have. To a large extent, these concepts come from our society. An ancient Greek could not know she had contracted a virus, she could not even think about viruses, because the concept of a virus was not yet socially available.<sup>9</sup> Since the vast majority of the concepts we use are social constructions, the possibility emerges that dominant social groups exert undue influence on the shape of our shared conceptual landscape. Such groups might, through censorship or propaganda, for example, prevent conceptual resources from being socially available when they

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<sup>8</sup> Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*, p. 155

<sup>9</sup> Thanks are owed to Mike DePaul for this example.

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would be disadvantageous, e.g., by enabling members of dominated groups to clearly understand the nature of their domination. Such dominant groups might also perpetuate conceptual structures that are difficult or impossible to use to see their domination as unjust. Less nefariously, concepts that will tend to be most useful for those on the social margins, or most applicable to their experiences, might simply fail to enter into the consideration of the broader epistemic community. Consequently, the epistemic tools that best reflect the needs and interests of the marginalized might fail to get the kind of uptake that makes sustained, and communicable, conceptualization possible.

Fricker gives as an example the experience of Carmita Wood, an employee of Cornell's Nuclear Physics Department in the 1970s. Wood suffered a variety of inappropriate behaviors, including repeated molestation, by an esteemed professor in the department. The stress caused Wood health problems; when university denied her request to transfer to a different department, she quit. When she applied for unemployment benefits, though, she didn't know how to describe her reasons for leaving, and so labeled them as "personal." Her unemployment claim was consequently denied. It wasn't until Wood and a group of other women spoke to each other about their experiences that they were able to categorize the treatment they had been subject to as a distinctive form of behavior. Together they coined the term 'sexual harassment' to describe it.<sup>10</sup> Certain kinds of social experiences are distinctive of particular social groups (e.g., sexual harassment, which tends to happen more frequently to women given social power dynamics); but when those social groups lack a significant amount of power to shape the shared conceptual landscape it can create a hermeneutical lacuna.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*, p. 149-51

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

I am not suggesting that conceiving of God as masculine necessarily generates a lacuna, but rather that it deeply distorts the collective hermeneutical resources we do have and through which we understand our experiences (especially those which relate to gender). Here we have concepts—a set of interrelated concepts of the divine, of what it is to be male or female, masculine or feminine—but they have been shaped in such a way that they *create* a certain reality rather than merely reflect it. In associating divine creativity, power, understanding, and authority with masculinity, especially against the backdrop of a history of women’s disadvantage and subordination, women are discouraged from leadership, from making the most of their potential beyond the domestic sphere, irrespective of their natural capabilities. We are implicitly led to consider our feminine creative powers as beginning and ending in our wombs, and the fullest realization of our God-given potential as revolving around our ability to promote the wellbeing of men. Under these circumstances, a belief in women’s inferiority is rationalized by the effects of it’s very being held.

Language, symbols, and modes of thought can take on special significance in virtue of the context in which they are put to use. Terms of reference that would be innocuous in one setting, or in isolation, can be highly damaging in another setting, or as a consequence of repeated association (and vice versa). A poignant illustration of this is the role of hate speech in propaganda. Leading into the Rwandan genocide, the terms for cockroach and snake were used repeatedly in reference to the Tutsi people. Hutu propaganda dehumanized the Tutsi by associating them with creatures that functioned as vermin. As Lynn Tirrell explains, “Getting ordinary people to participate in practices of linguistic violence seasoned them to the structures of power that rendered collateral forms of non-linguistic violence conceivable. . .”<sup>12</sup> In Rwanda,

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<sup>12</sup> Genocidal Language Games, p. 186

snakes and cockroaches were creatures to be killed. Attaching these terms to persons as slurs creates a kind of objectifying distance: “This cultivated anti-Tutsi attitudes and licensed inferences about what should be done, granting permissions for action. When told to kill the snakes, the question ‘how?’ would not arise. Rwandans already knew how to kill snakes, and knew that it was mandatory. The derogatory terms used in the propaganda were well chosen, meshing everyday linguistic and non-linguistic practices, to engender genocidal actions.”<sup>13</sup> If someone *is* a snake you have permission to treat them *as you would* a snake. Terming someone a snake would have very different consequences in a society that worships snakes from that in a society that kills snakes. The word for snake became a slur in Rwanda because it took on a new social meaning when repeatedly used to refer not only to a class of non-human animals which it was normal to kill, but also to a disfavored sub-population. Reference can evolve over time; concept deployment can be manipulated to influence a concept’s scope and significance.

The same phenomenon can also occur unintentionally, though. Normative concepts, when deployed without due attention to our individual circumstances, our history, or our context, may be easily subject to misappropriation in damaging and unjust ways. Think, for example, of the concept of ‘genius.’ There is no conceptual incoherence in a genius having a kind of James Bond-kind of suaveness about them, being a non-white-male, or having a sense of style that’s committed to lipstick and stilettos. Nonetheless, the concept is typically deployed in reference to not just those who are intelligent, especially skilled or creative, but to those who fit a certain social profile: white men, perhaps socially awkward, and, in contemporary parlance, stereotypically “geeky.” So much so, it takes special cognitive effort to recognize geniuses who

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid, p. 205

do not fit this profile *as* geniuses.<sup>14</sup> Further, we may be naturally inclined to deploy the concept of ‘genius’ in reference to those who match our stereotypical associations even if they lack the characteristic of genius itself.

In part, this is likely due to history. Otto Weininger – in his influential (though now discredited) *Sex and Character: An Investigation of Fundamental Principles* – laboriously argued that genius belonged inherently to masculinity, but moreover, *true* masculinity belonged to only a particular race of men.<sup>15</sup> That is, genius for Weininger was not only a masculine quality, but an Aryan quality, too. The explicit racism and sexism in Weininger’s philosophy should sit uncomfortably with us today, but the great success of his book in terms of readership and political influence is historically significant.<sup>16</sup> How we put concepts to work over time, in our culture, and in our epistemic lives may ultimately shape the content we take them to have. Likewise, when we take God to be appropriately represented as masculine but not feminine, and when we repeatedly associate divinity with masculinity, something is communicated not just about divinity, but about masculinity itself. As Mary Daly put it, “If God is male, then the male is God.”

It is easy to say in reply, at least in the Judeo-Christian tradition, that irrespective of how we understand God’s gender, all of us – male and female – are meant to be understood as equally created in God’s image. But how that’s operationalized in our epistemic and religious lives is a separate matter. We’re supposed to embrace our God-given natures, but if God is male, my God-given nature, unlike that of my male counter-parts, is in a deeply significant sense not a *God-like*

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<sup>14</sup> Cf. Sarah-Jane Leslie, et al. “Expectations of brilliance underlie gender distributions across academic disciplines” *Science* 16 January 2015: Vol. 347 no. 6219, especially pp. 262-265

<sup>15</sup> For example, Weininger writes, “It is this want of depth which explains the absence of truly great Jews; like women they are without any trace of genius.”

<sup>16</sup> Cf. “Weininger in Nazi Ideology” in *Jews and Gender: Responses to Otto Weininger*.

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nature. Holding at one and the same time that women have been equally created in the image of God but that God is only appropriately referred to as male, and not female, is something like the conceptual analogue of telling someone not to think of a pink elephant. You can utter the words, but once you've understood them, their intended force has been undermined.

Traditionalists might object (and some do<sup>17</sup>) that my view likewise faces an apparent practical contradiction: a religious framework that casts women as uniquely valued – to be cherished, loved, and protected – is not one which views women as inferior to men, but rather merely as *different* from men. How can one revere women and be sexist toward them at the same time? This line of thinking fails to recognize that policing is more than mere punishment. As Lady Hale once said, “A gilded cage is still a cage.” When women are socially disadvantaged in virtue of their gender, however much they are revered for acquiescing to, or making the most of, a limited life, reverence does not generate equality. A sexist community can value women insofar as they fulfill their expected gendered role while simultaneously harboring disdain for the role itself. Take, for example, hatred directed at gay men by way of homophobic reactions to their perceived feminization, or stereotypically hostile reactions from some quarters of gender essentialism to the claim that men ought to share equally in domestic care-giving roles.

We see this dichotomy – reverence for women expressed alongside their denigration – borne out in popular Christian discourse. Leaders of Promise Keepers, an international Evangelical organization for Christian men, published a best-selling book in 1994 that explained their idea of Christian manhood. With respect to the contemporary American family, one of the authors writes, “I am convinced that the primary cause of this national crisis is the feminization

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<sup>17</sup> John Piper, “God Created Man: Male and Female, What Does It Mean to Be Complementarian?” <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/god-created-man-male-and-female-what-does-it-mean-to-be-complementarian>

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of the American male. When I say feminization, I am not talking about sexual preference. I'm trying to describe a misunderstanding of manhood that has produced a nation of sissified men who abdicate their role as spiritually pure leaders, thus forcing women to fill the vacuum."<sup>18</sup> The author goes on to advise men that they need to "take back" leadership of their families because men have mistakenly handed that role to their wives. That is, to be feminized is an embarrassment, to be feminine is to be a "sissy," and women lead only because men have failed; and yet, Promise Keepers is purportedly committed to women's equality.

The same ideas continue to be expressed in Christian communities today. By way of example, in a piece published in 2016 on James Dobson's website, JT Waresak writes,

It's high-time that we wake up and not deny our God-given gender but embrace it.

Men need to be men, and women need to be women. Understand this: I can't be a good man and not love my wife and my children. I can't be a good man and not put my family's interests above my own . . . 'Wearing the pants' means to lead within one's home. Men, this is our God-given calling. While some women may want to 'wear the pants,' I believe most desire for the men to lead their families.

Our wives and sons and daughters need to see us 'wearing the pants' and setting an example of what it means for a man to be the spiritual leader of his home.<sup>19</sup>

Being a "good man," on this view, requires loving one's wife, putting her interests above your own, but simultaneously distancing oneself from femininity by asserting authority. However this framework for understanding gender relations is meant to be interpreted with respect to women's equality, it's incoherent to claim masculine authority is normative and yet deny women's

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<sup>18</sup> Tony Evans, *Seven Promises of a Promise Keeper*, p. 73

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.drjamesdobson.org/blogs/the-fatherhood-challenge/the-fatherhood-challenge/2016/06/22/5-keys-to-lead-your-wife-ie-wear-the-pants>

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subordination. To be subordinated *just is* to stand in a relation of subservience to some authority.

What this theology of gender communicates is that women's subordination is good and natural, at least when coupled with protective care.

Rewarding those who follow patriarchal social norms and punishing those who violate them are two sides of the same coin. Norms are enforced by incentivizing compliance with one hand and disincentivizing deviation with the other. That's why, as Mary Daly wrote, "Proponents of equality charge that there is inexcusable hypocrisy in a species of ecclesiastical propaganda which pretends to put woman on a pedestal but which in reality prevents her from genuine self-fulfillment and from active, adult-sized participation in society."<sup>20</sup> (This is also why norms of subordination can be so pernicious. Precisely because subordinating ideology purports to express the value of the subordinated, it is easy for the well-intentioned to be drawn in, and it is difficult for the well-intentioned to come to recognize themselves as actively, even if unwittingly, causing harm.<sup>21</sup>)

Conceptual schemas create expectations that influence both how we act in, and how we perceive the world. They are the epistemic scripts of our daily lives. When I ask you to think about what you'd like for dinner this evening, it's exceedingly unlikely that a rubber tire occurred to you because you do not conceptualize tires as food. Likewise, it's unlikely that when you go to the grocery store you scan the aisles looking for the newest Call of Duty. We do not think of grocery stores as being the kinds of places that sell video games. Stereotypes and conceptual associations play a heuristic role in our epistemic lives. When you go to buy a car, you might be more inclined to treat the sales representative's testimony as suspect than you would, say, a shoe salesperson's, on account of stereotypes of used car salespersons as slick and

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<sup>20</sup> Mary Daly, *The Church and The Second Sex*, pg. 53

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Jason Stanley, *How Propaganda Works*.

dishonest. Seeing someone's shaved head and tattoos might prime you to interpret their shyness as being "strong and silent." As a white woman, it is less likely that someone would accidentally take me to represent a threat than, say, a black man. Conceptual schemas can serve as helpful epistemic resources or they can be misleading and biasing. The importance of conceptual schemas in organizing our epistemic lives (for good or for ill) is easy to underestimate because they are often not apparent until the expectations they generate are noticeably violated. In religious communities, and in cultures where religious thought is influential, how gender is understood in relation to the divine has an extraordinary potential to reify gender inequality or disrupt it. Do we recognize women as the kind of creatures capable of leadership? Equally deserving of autonomy, or self-determination? Do we understand the most perfect, powerful, and loving being to only be appropriately represented as masculine?

Feminist theologians and philosophers who argue for the use of inclusive language for talking about the divine aren't interested in inclusion for its own sake; the concern is not merely to protect women from hurt feelings. Rather, it's about creating the kind of religious and epistemic communities that foster flourishing, truth-seeking, and justice. Truth and justice are tied up in one another; "Our falsified and inauthentic ways of dealing with our fellow men are allied to our falsification of the idea of God. Our unjust society and our perverted idea of God are in close and terrible alliance."<sup>22</sup> Sexual discrimination and violence are not divinely ordained, and yet too often, religion has been used to rationalize and excuse abuse. If there is a God, in virtue of God's love and perfection, sexual bigotry and prejudice run counter to standing in right relationship to both the creator and creation. As the Christian scriptures go, love you neighbor as yourself. Moreover, we should expect our understanding of God to promote justice; to the extent

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<sup>22</sup> Juan Luis Segundo, *Our Idea of God*

that God is perfectly good, loving and powerful, conceptualizing God properly should enable just relationships. Of course, any concept can be abused—any linguistic term can be misapplied or misunderstood—but if we find that when we use a concept a particular way (particularly divine concepts), harm consistently follows, then we have reason to reconsider how we employ our epistemic and linguistic resources.

This is Aquinas's insight in the *Summa Theologica* when he writes of the appropriateness of understanding God through the lens of personhood:

Although the word “person” is not found applied to God in Scripture, either in the Old or New Testament, nevertheless what the word signifies is found to be affirmed of God in many places of Scripture; as that He is the supreme self-subsisting being, and the most perfectly intelligent being. If we could speak of God only in the very terms themselves of Scripture, it would follow that no one could speak about God in any but the original language of the Old or New Testament. The urgency of confuting heretics made it necessary to find new words to express the ancient faith about God. Nor is such a kind of novelty to be shunned; since it is by no means profane, for it does not lead us astray from the sense of Scripture.<sup>23</sup>

The language of divine persons is extra-biblical, but to the extent that what it expresses is true, and consistent with revelation, it is permissible. Moreover, to the extent that it refutes heresy, it is necessary. Likewise, language that disrupts the masculinization of the divine is a necessary precursor for religious thought to be genuinely compatible with gender equity.

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<sup>23</sup> Aquinas, ST I. Q. 29. A. 3.