SPEAKING NEW MEANINGS:
Feminist Theology and the Question of Language

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The time has come to liberate our thoughts of God from such sexism; and a richer trinitarian specultion with the Spirit...may be one way toward that goal. It is obvious that those who say "God" and mean it cannot accept a male God without falling into idolatry.

--Krister Stendahl

INTRODUCTION

The history of critical thought in Christianity includes many perspectives. Philosophers, apologists, Church fathers, popes, reformers, evangelists and theologians have contributed to the formation of doctrine, scripture, liturgy and scholarly treatises. Overwhelmingly excluded have been the contributions of women, with the exception of a few saints, evangelists, or sect-founders. Women's critical thought about religion has been largely absent from the theological tradition. When it appeared in writings by women, it was often forgotten, ignored or dismissed.

Women's thought about religion often involves more than simply expanding upon theological ideas set forth and doctrinalized in the church by men. Rather, it frequently involves criticizing Christianity as an institution of, propagator of, and supporter of patriarchy and the rigid, restrictive roles which characterize it. Women's approaches often direct attention toward both negative and positive influences Christianity as an institution has had on the female sex. Their work reaches toward a fundamental questioning of the sexual status quo. It adds vitality and a rumbling of rebellion, revolution, and revelation to what sometimes seems a stagnant and foreign, if not exclusive, arena of men's religious discourse.

With the most recent tide of the women's movement in the

past two decades, feminist thought entered all academic fields. A wave of fresh inquiry entered religion, dubbed "feminist theology." Although the women's movement presently seems to be in hibernation among the general population, feminist thought and writing in religion is growing and has a broad reception and influence in academies. Its influence has also been felt in some congregations where there previously had been little challenge to traditional doctrines and values.

Women and men at all levels of society have begun to ask questions about the role of women in the Christian community. Women, in sensing their devalued and restricted status in the church, have asked why they are not included in the language of prayers, hymns, and liturgies which intend to serve as a praising vehicle for the whole community of believers. The experience of "women's consciousness" has made feminists aware of not only discriminatory practices, but also of language in the church which must be reformed if women are to play a dynamic role in Christian community.

The general exclusion and restriction of women in Christian church history is poignantly visible is specific instances of exclusion of females from liturgical language. Hymns and readings which address "sons of God" and "brothers in Christ" can be painful verbal reminders that women have not been viewed as active contributors to the living faith community, and are only welcome there when attached to their husbands, fathers, brothers and sons. Because language is seen both as a reflector

and creator of patriarchal culture, this discussion focuses on language and imagery as a topic in feminist theology.

While feminist theology addresses diverse topics, from biblical interpretation to ecology to primitive religions to human relations, it gives much attention to language and symbol in Christianity. Though he criticizes some of the presuppositions of feminist theology, evangelical writer Donald Bloesch recognizes this emphasis:

> Where feminist theology makes its most signal contribution to theology is the way in which it calls us to reexamine the language of faith. It reminds us that much of the language of Scripture is symbolic and pictorial, that it points beyond itself to realities that cannot be directly apprehended by theoretical reason.1

In their endorsement of inclusive language--words for humanity and/or deity which are not gender-exclusive--feminists reflect their awareness of the power and influence of language. They sense that, inasmuch as language is used to name reality, reality is defined by language, and the language used not only reflects our world, but is and becomes our reality--our world experience.

Historically, the Christian church has been reformed by, and has adapted to, social changes such as democratization and ethnic minority rights movements. The American women's movement will also have an impact on the religion of contemporary American society. The direction its influence takes depends upon what

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1 Donald G. Bloesch, The Battle for the Trinity (Philadelphia: Vine Books, 1985) p. xviii.

leading feminist theologians are proposing, how the general population receives these proposals, and how the institutionalized church responds to the call for reform. Language is a central issue not only to feminist scholars, but also to women and men at large. The church must answer affirmatively to the demand that it, as a community, no longer ignorantly or intentionally support sexism through its choice of words.

This discussion will address the issue of inclusive language and the feminist perspective. The viewpoints of a number of theologians, both traditional/evangelical and feminist/liberationist, will be included. Initially, the issue will be placed within the context of the literature of feminist theologians. General descriptions of representatives from this spectrum will serve as background. Next, the specific question of inclusive language for humanity will be addressed, including an examination of the history of gender-specific words in the English langauge, and a brief discussion of proposals for inclusive human language use in the church.

The question of language for deity is currently a more pressing issue in theological circles, and will be given greater attention in this study. To portray the various viewpoints on God-language within feminist theology, three prominent feminist theologians will be consulted and analysed. The discussion will note feminist theologians' idea of God as Verb, and their accusation of current language idolatry or "Bibliolatry." A discussion of Donald Bloesch's evangelical criticism of feminist

theology and its specific demands for language change will follow. Arguments for the retention of strictly masculine imagery and language for God will surface.

Especially difficult issues for inclusive langauge proponents will be addressed, within the context of the evangelical-feminist debate. The effect inclusive language may have on the traditional doctrine of the Trinity and the debate over transcendence and immanence appear to be at the heart of the God-language issue.

After a number of positions are articulated, I will defend the value of inclusive language, taking into consideration the possible affects on the Christian faith and society at large.

The feminist movement for inclusive language holds great potential for religious change both within and outside the church. Just as the movement's strength decides future theological trends, the response of the church to this movement decides the impact Christianity will have on the lives of women and men in the present and future. The nature of religious language has become a burning issue in contemporary theology.2 In efforts to oppose injustice, language is pivotal. When the process of naming reality is changed, there is a greater chance that reality can be changed. The yet unanswered question is what form such change will take: whether feminist's language/ theological transformations strengthen the Christian church, or

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2 Bloesch, Trinity, p. xv.

inevitably draw theological implications toward a religion quite different from, or even at odds with, Christianity as it is commonly practiced today.

FEMINIST ANGLES

The history of the American feminist movement exhibits its diversity of philosophy, demands, methods and effects. Feminists differ on whether women's basic rights and roles should be based on their fundamental commonalities with or differences from men. They debate whether women need individual or communal affirmation. They discuss whether reproductive functions should be central to women's destiny. They take sides, forming coalitions first with abolitionists, then with socialists, then breaking these ties, and later aligning with peace and civil rights movements. They fluctuate between single-issue political struggles and complex, complete feminist visions of society. They are not easily, accurately, or specifically labeled. Not surprisingly, feminists concerned with religion show much the same diversity.

In his most recent book, The Battle for the Trinity, Donald Bloesch categorizes current feminist theologians according to their stance on the language question. These categories nearly over-simplify the complex issues in feminist theology and make it easier for Bloesch to attack whole segments of feminist theology according to their views on this one issue. Yet, for the purposes of this discussion, the categories are accurate and helpful for

putting the issue in its context.

"Conservative feminists" is the first category. This strand challenges patriarchal subordination, but is not willing to abandon the historic language of the faith. While they press for inclusive human language, "they balk at any basic revision of the language about God, since this indicates for them a change in faith orientation."3 Bloesch includes Paul Jewett, Jean Caffey Lyles, and Patricia Gundry in this group.

Second are "reformist feminists" who "seek a wholesale revision of God-language in order to counter alleged sexism in this language and to prepare the way for a more inclusive family of God."4 They encourage inclusive language for the Trinity, such as "Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier." They refer to God in non-gender, non-hierarchical language; they address Jesus with egalitarian terms such as "Friend;" and they often refer to the Holy Spirit as the feminine aspect of God. The reformists continue to work within the church, attempting to purify Christianity of sexism and patriarchalism. Included in this group are Rosemary Radford Ruether, Sallie McFague, Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, Elisabeth Schussler-Fiorenza and Letty Russell.

Finally, the "revolutionary or radical feminists" reject Christianity as incurably patriarchal and opt for a new religion.

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3 Bloesch, Trinity, p. 4.

4 Bloesch, Trinity, p. 5.

The new spirituality may be based on women's consciousness, a restoration of goddess religion, witchcraft, or nature mysticism. Mary Daly, Naomi Goldenberg, Starhawk, Carol Ochs, Carol Christ, Judith Plaskow and Penelope Washbourn represent this radical strand.

When addressing the topic of language most of these theologians concern themselves with God-language; but the call for inclusive language in Christianity comes on two fronts. First, church leaders are urged to use inclusive terms to describe humans. Masculine terms which supposedly include all people, such as in "Christ reconciles all men to God" and "the Spirit unites all in Christian brotherhood" are no longer acceptable to many parishoners, both women and men. Second, the issue of religious language encompasses terms used for deity. Currently, this is the more controversial issue, and rightly so, since the debate revolves around concepts of God, religious authority, and doctrines of Christology and the Trinity. This second issue will be addressed at length later. Let us first examine the more commonly encountered question of language for humanity.

LANGUAGE FOR HUMANITY

Undoubtedly, a society's language is influenced by specific prevailing elements of the culture, be they climate, social organization, or value emphasis. Eskimos developed hundreds of words to differentiate various types of snow. So, cultures which

recognize a significant difference between men and women, such as the Old English, had words to differentiate adults of different sex. Inevitably, the language of English/American culture was influenced by the partriarchal organization of the society. Over fifty years ago, linguist Otto Jesperson observed that the English language is "positively and expressly masculine...it is the language of a grown-up man and has very little childish or feminine about it."5

One of the more pertinent difficulties is with the use of "man" as both specifically male and as a generic term. Jesperson observed, "The generic singular "man" sometimes means both sexes...and sometimes only one." Because of its ambuiguty of reference, Jespersen wrote that "man" used as the generic person "is decidedly a defect in the English language," and he went on to mention that "the tendency recently has been to use unambiguous, if clumsy expressions like a human being."6

In Old English the word "man" meant "person" or "human being," and when used for an individual was equally applicable to either sex. The terms "wer" and "wif" served as the sex-specific terms: "wer" meant "adult male," and "wif" meant "adult female;" the combined forms of "waepman" and "wifman" meant,

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5 Otto Jesperson, Growth and Structure of the English Language (Oxford, England: Basil Blackwell, 1935) p. 2.

6 Otto Jesperson, Language: Its Nature, Development and Origin (New York: W.W. Norton & Co. Inc, 1964) p. 231.

respectively, "adult male person" and "adult female person."7 "Wifman" evolved into "woman," while "wif" became "wife." By around 1000 A.D., "man" eventually ceased to be used for individual women and replaced "wer" and "waepman" as a specific term distinguishing an adult male from an adult female.

But "man" continued to be used in generalizations about both sexes. "As long as most generalizations about people were made by men about men, the ambiguity nestling in this dual usage was either not noticed or thought not to matter."8 "Then, as now, male control of the media and important social institutions evidently made it easy for men to acquire what had once been a generic for their own terms."9 Our modern use of "man" in the narrow sense, as meaning males specifically, was the predominant usage by the eighteenth century. Yet current dictionaries include both the narrow and broad definitions of the word.

Julia Stanley explains the discrepancy in the use of "man" as generic and specific, and the use of "woman" as specifically female:

> ...we find males cast as the "generic person" in English in those contexts associated with male behavior and male concerns such as anger, control, autonomy, history, and dignity. All of these areas are

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7 Casey Miller and Kate Swift, The Handbook of Nonsexist Writing (New York: Harper and Row, 1980) p. 9.

8 Miller and Swift, Handbook, p. 9.

9 Julia P. Stanley and others, Sexism and Language (Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1977) p. 52.

> potentially human concerns, but they are traditionally associated with men.... ...the noun "woman" is used as a self-contained explanatory term for a restricted set of human behaviors such as eccentricity, housecleaning, effortlessness, cowardice, and triviality--personality traits that are certainly not possessed only by women.10

Some language "purists" argue that since "man" originally meant "human," it is wrong to limit its use to a specific rather than a generic term. "In general, the suggestion that English does not have a generic person has been dismissed as "misguided" and categorized as illicit "tampering" with the language, or as a "fad," or as a grotesque "error" in the same class as ain't and double negatives." 11

But as language experts Casey Miller and Kate Swift suggest, the use of this word has already changed:

> To go on using in its former sense a word whose meaning has changed is counterproductive. The point is not that we should recognize semantic change, but that in order to be precise, in order to be understood, we must. ...continuing to use English in ways that have become misleading is not different from misusing data, whether the misuse is inadvertent or planned.12

The danger in not recognizing and adapting to this change of the word "man" from neuter to masculine is that language-users will become confused. One begins to ask if males are not the norm

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10 Stanley, pp. 56-8.

11 Stanley, p. 51.

12 Miller and Swift, Handbook, p. 8.

for humanity, since the masculine term is often used to speak of humanity in general. Certainly, one would not think that the church would support such language which dehumanizes or at least misnames some half of its members. "If the word "man" were not so emotionally charged and politically useful, its ambiguity would have led long ago to its disuse in any but the limited sense it immediately brings to mind."13

Not only is the use of "man" on trial, but the problem of pronouns is in some senses even greater. The issue is not only in avoiding using "he" as a generic pronoun, but also in which nouns are marked as feminine and masculine. The English language has mostly neuter nouns, and since there is no gender-inclusive singular pronoun ("it" being inappropriate in reference to persons), pronominal agreement can be problematic.

A standard traditional text defines pronominal agreement in the following way: "When a pronoun has an antecedent, it agrees with that antecedent in gender, number, and person."14 English does not have "grammatical" gender, that is, nouns gender-marked "feminine," "neuter," or "masculine" independent of biological sex. Grammarians suggest, though, that in English "natural" gender (classification of nouns on the basis of biological sex)

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13 Miller and Swift, Handbook, p. 13.

14 Newman B. Birk and Genevieve B. Birk, Understanding and Using English, (Indianapolis: Odyssey Press Publisher, 1951) p. 735.

determines pronominal reference. But Julia Stanley suggests that English does not have "natural" gender, either.15 Rather, pronoun use is currently based on improperly and stereotypically marked "masculine" and "feminine" nouns.

> In general or abstract discussions, we find the pronoun "he" used to replace the antecedent noun; we use the "feminine" pronoun "she" only in situations in which we are referring to a specific female.16

In English, there are a small number of nouns marked inherently feminine. These are nouns referring to socially defined functions and occupations of women (such as wife, mother, nurse and secretary) and inanimate objects (such as land, earth, nature, cars, ships, bodies of water, countries and the moon).17 One explanation for the personification of these items was given by L. Murray in 1795: "A ship, a country, a city, &c. are likewise made feminine, being receivers or containers."18 This explanation may derive from the myth of exclusively male parenthood, in which the female was believed to be the soil or container for the male seed which was a tiny fetus in and of itself, without the contribution of the female cell. Stanley suggests another explanation:

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15 Stanley, p. 60.

16 Stanley, p. 60.

17 Stanley, p. 66.

18 Miller and Swift, Handbook, p. 63.

> ...one way of accounting for these metaphorical extensions of female-specific reference derives from the male point of view, which assumes male dominance and male control of the earth, the world, all the land, and the oceans. All of these things are regarded as their possessions. As one legal textbook defines the situation: "land, like woman, is for possessing."19

Using "he" and "she" in these contexts serves to advance oppressive sexual stereotypes. Beyond this problem, one again encounters confusion in the use of "he" as a generic pronoun. Psychologists' studies have confirmed that for the most native speakers of English, "he," in a generic context, does not mean "he or she."20

In order to partially alleviate the situation, there is need for a gender-inclusive singlar pronoun in the language. This need has long been recognized, and has given rise to suggestions such as "co," "E," "tey," and "hesh." Feminist and other authors have used some singular sex-inclusive pronouns of their own making: "na," "person," "per," "hir."21 Many suggest using "they" as a singular, noting that its common misuse as singular suggests that the new usage would be easily adopted. "...'they' has been in use as a replacement for indefinite pronouns at least since Chaucer. Only the influence of the traditional male grammarians has kept it out of so-called Formal

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19 Stanley, p. 66.

20 Miller and Swift, Handbook, p. 47.

21 Miller and Swift, Handbook, p. 46.

English."22

The problem of gender-inclusive pronouns will not soon be solved, at least not until organizations such as the Modern Language Association officially accept a singular "they," or media popularizes another alternative. There are, however, steps which can be taken to make language for humans more inclusive. Many publishers, writers and speakers today are making the conscious effort to use non-sexist and inclusive terms.

Although inclusive langauge for humanity is certainly not yet a non-issue in Christian circles, it has largely been accepted and encouraged in many denominations. Constant and consistent use will familiarize "he or she" to congregants' ears. Many services, hymnals and liturgies now exist which use inclusive language for humanity. Efforts by careful wordsmiths can gracefully adapt those pieces of worship which still use sexist langauge.

The adoption of inclusive language requires first an awareness of language that is exclusive and/or sexist. Then common sense rules can be kept in mind for everyday use. When the sex of a person is known, it is best to use the gender-specific title or pronoun, such as using "chairwoman" rather than "chairperson" if one is addressing a woman. "The use of neutralized terms perpetuates the invisibility of women in

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22 Stanley, p. 74.

positions outside their traditionally defined roles."23 When the sex of the subject is ambiguous, such as an unspecified person, group, or a neuter object, "man" or "he" should not be used. Rather, "person," "s/he," or "it" (when referring to unsexed objects such as the church in common prose) are more accurate choices.

Changing existing worship language requires both creativity and diligent respect for the original author. For example, hymn lyrics are not easily changed measure for measure; alternating male and female subjects by verse can avoid exclusivity without drastically changing the message of the hymn. Through the transition phase, it is important to remember that choosing inclusive human language is not creating new words. "Removing sexist words, phrases, comparisons, jokes and the like is NOT changing the English language. We recommend alternatives already extant in the language and in use among people."24

Though the call for inclusive human language issue is not completely fulfilled, God-language is a more provocative and theologically challenging topic. Feminist theologians confront greater resistance when referring to God as "Mother" than when requesting their inclusion as "sisters" in the church.

THREE FEMINISTS ON GOD-LANGUAGE

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23 Stanley, p. 74.

24 Stanley, p. 74.

An examination of the theological stance of a number of prominent feminist theologians will be helpful in putting the issue of language in context. Nelle Morton, Mary Daly, and Rosemary Radford Ruether, though representing only the "radical" and "reformist" camps, are three who have made significant contributions to feminist work on religious language. Comprehensive explications and critiques of these scholars go beyond the scope of this paper. What follows are brief overviews of each theologian's arguments, taken from their most well-known writings which largely address the issue of language.

Nelle Morton

Highly aware of the connection between the phenomenon of "women's consciousness" and the re-evaluation of religious language, Nelle Morton became the first theologian to teach a university course on women, theology, and language.25 After decades of teaching, lecturing and working for human rights, she has become a mentor for many current feminists writing about theology and language. A collection of writings from the 1970s, The Journey is Home (1985) reveals her critique of patriarchy, her experience of women's consciousness, and her resulting vision of a world with "new ears," a new language, and a new community.

"Patriarchy may be defined as any social system in which men are perceived as inherently superior and more powerful than

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25 Nelle Morton, The Journey is Home (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), last page biographical note on author.

women."26 Morton sees patriarchy as pervading and shaping the entire western civilization. Patriarchy has led to universal oppression of women, the poor, the nonwhite, to domination of the Third World peoples, to world wars, and the exploitation of the earth and its resources.27

In addition, Morton says patriarchy has structured reality in terms of oppositions, such as authority/obedience, power/powerless, haves/have-nots, master/slave, good/evil. The first of the opposites was assigned to the father, or Father God, and the second to women as "the other."28 "Patriarchy polarized human beings by gender and endowed each gender with certain roles and properties so that neither could experience full humanness."29 It created a hierarchical order of humans, and evoked cosmic myths to support these structures.

This system provided the language for the Biblical writers. When the burning bush answered Moses' question with "I am who I am," Moses was hearing that the voice was above naming, but if a name was necessary it must come from the language of the people. Although "Elohim," "Yahweh," and "God" attribute no gender,

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26 Morton, p. 36.

27 Morton, p. 37.

28 Morton, p. 75

29 Morton, p. 76.

Morton writes, "the gender lies in the limiting language and the male images out of the prevailing culture that projected an ontological masculinity on the deity."30 Hence, gender for God comes more through images evoked from traditional words than from the words themselves.

To Morton, images are more powerful than concepts. Whereas concepts can be formulated, controlled, and corrected, images have a life of their own, and often function when persons are most unaware of their functioning. Images can surface emotion in all, appear to act on their own, cloud issues, and misplace the focus of discussion by operating in the unconscious.31

Morton insists that there is nothing wrong with theologizing and creating liturgy out of male experience. "The basic problem lies in claiming the resulting theology valid for the entire community."32 Women do not seek a feminine theology except iconoclastically to show up one kind of idolatry with another, Morton writes. By using strictly feminine imagery and language, women show men the alienation they experience in traditional Christian settings.

Her experience with women's groups led her to see women's consciousness as a phenomenon which is partially identified by a

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30 Morton, p. 77.

31 Morton, pp. 20-1.

32 Morton, p. 52.

new langauge of sisterhood. "Once women began to be aware of what langauge had done to them as little girls and was now doing to their own little girls, they experienced as dehumanizing the pervasive male character of the entire language system."33 Morton explains the healing and redemptive experience of women's groups where women were encouraged to share experiences, emotions, speak their own visions of reality, and were listened to. "Women are concerned to be heard. We believe that once men begin to hear--can hear, really hear and see--a new order and a new language free from sexism will emerge."34

Out of women's consciousness comes the need to be heard. For Morton, being heard is the first and most important step in a new language. "...women are experiencing God as a great hearing one, one who heard us to speech, rather than one who has spoken us to hearing."35 In hearing to speech, which Morton says is the more divine act than speaking into hearing, God hears the human being into speech; the word is the human being's word; the word heard into speech creates and announces new personhood--new consciousness awakened in the human being. "Speaking first to be heard is power over. Hearing to bring forth speech is

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33 Morton, p. 20.

34 Morton, p. 59.

35 Morton, p. 60.

empowering."36

> Already women in touch with a new reality experience the unexamined male language as illusion, and are aware that so long as men protect the hierarchical structure and maintain control over creation they engage in the deepest betrayal of themselves.37

Morton concedes that there is yet no language that embraces the full human experience; there is no God-language free from sexist imagery. "Elohim," literally translated, refers to the whole council of heaven--goddesses and gods. It resists reduction to one gender, but in its interchangeable use with masculine names for God has been filled with masculine imagery. She points out that "Lord," "King of the Universe," "Mighty One," "Everlasting Father," "Prince of Peace," "Man for Others," and "Son," with accompanying masculine pronouns and attributes, all project images of domination and sex partiality.

But Morton does not believe that simply including feminine opposites for the purpose of balance acheives anything significant. "Feminine names and pronouns for God, as masculine, draw from stereotyped cultural images. Two crippled parts make only a crippled whole."38

Rather, Morton would commence with a new consciousness, one which begins by saying no to a system that legitimates these

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36 Morton, p. 210.

37 Morton, p. 30.

38 Morton, p. 73.

images and symbols through cosmic myths and daily ceremonial rituals. "Women cannot speak for the whole any more than men have been able to speak for the whole. A whole theology would envision all of the people speaking out of their own experiences into the process and toward full humanness."39

Morton's hope is a new community:

> The New Testament envisions a community in which there is neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, and no male and female (note the change in the form of modifiers for the last phrase: neither/nor changed to no). No one in the new community will be identified by her/his sex.40

This community would involve the following aspects: women and men hearing and speaking openly with one another; mutuality--a history which is inclusive of all people and at home with the natural universe; new Spirit movement transcending sex; less Word of God and more speech of people because of God moving through the human community. It would be God in the midst of the people, a world where the personal could be recognized for the political it is and the political the personal.41

Mary Daly

> Part of the challenge is to recognize the poverty of all words and symbols and the fact of our past idolatry regarding them, and then to turn to our own resources

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39 Morton, p. 83.

40 Morton, p. 73.

41 Morton, p. 85.

> for bringing about the radically new in our own lives.42

Mary Daly, one of the foremost feminist theologians, began her critique of the church's institutionalized patriarchy in The Church and The Second Sex (1968). Since that time, Daly's arguments have become more radicalized; she has been referred to as a "radical feminist theologian." While she initially laid out the history of sexism in the Roman Catholic Church and hoped for its reformation through progressive statements by the Second Vatican Council, she now sees little hope for the church. Her more recent books call for new spiritual mindsets and fringe communities so that the rising women's consciousness can bring about the revolution which entails total human liberation.

In Beyond God the Father (1973), Daly centers her arguments on the necessity of transcending male-created religious language and masculine symbolization for God and for the notion of divine incarnation in human form. She predicts that a new langugage will be generated from the experience of women's consciousness spirituality.

Daly sees patriarchy and sexism as all-pervasive, penetrating every aspect of human experience. Sensitive of this, feminism becomes her world-view. "The women's critique is not of a few passages but of a universe of sexist suppositions."43

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42 Mary Daly, Beyond God the Father, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973) p. 21.

43 Daly, p. 5.

Patriarchy and the sublimation of women are evils from which derive other evils such as war, racism, and economic oppression. Women's liberation means human liberation, a willingness to include all current "nonpersons" excluded from normative life in true human experience. Daly's ideas reach toward a "world of New Being" which is beyond simply an opposition to current institutionalized religion. "Feminism is the final and therefore the first cause, and...this movement is movement," she writes.44

For Daly, language is integral to both the problem and the solution. Throughout history, women have not had the power of naming themselves or their world. Male-naming has prevailed and been taken as adequate and complete, in spite of the fact that women's voice has not been heard.

> The 'method' of the evolving spiritual consciousness of women is nothing less than [the] right to speak humanly--a reclaiming of the right to name. The liberation of language is rooted in the liberation of ourselves.45

Daly argues that religious symbols arise out of human experience rather than divine inspiration. "Religious symbols fade and die when the cultural situation that gave rise to them and supported them ceases to give them plausibility." 46 The effect of the evolving woman-consciousness, she believes, will be

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44 Daly, p. 190.

45 Daly, p. 8.

46 Daly, p. 15.

activism and creative thought which will take the movement beyond the symbols and doctrines of patriarchal religion. "The basic idol-breaking will be done on the level of internalized images of male superiority, on the plane of exorcising them from consciousness and from the cultural institutions that breed them."47

There is a point to feminists referring to God as "she," Daly contends, but today the analysis has reached a deeper level. To stop at this level of discourse would be a trivialization of the deep problem of human becoming in women. "The most basic change has to take place in women--in our being and self-image."48

Daly seeks a psychic change in imagery for God as much as literal word change. To listen to women's experiences, to discover the spiritual dynamic of this revolution and to speak these dynamics in womens' own lives and words "does not mean that an entirely new language for God, materially speaking, will emerge, ex nihilo, but rather that a new meaning context is coming into being as we recreate our lives in a new experiential context."49

> ...it is probable that the new God-word's essential newness will be conveyed more genuinely by

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47 Daly, p. 29.

48 Daly, p. 19.

49 Daly, p. 37.

> its being placed in a different semantic field than by a mere material alteration in sound or appearance of the word.50

Daly seeks the understanding of God as Verb, as Be-ing, who is over and against non-being. "The unfolding of the woman-consciousness is an intimation of the endless unfolding of God."51 God as Verb means a rejection of the hypostatized God-projections and their use to justify exploitation and oppression. There will come a realization that "...neither the Father, nor the Son, nor the Mother is God, the Verb who transcends anthropomorphic symbolization."52

Daly's book manifests some new words and new uses of old words. "Be-ing" is God, the intransitive Verb, the most active and dynamic of all, infinitely more personal than a static noun. Daly uses the term "Antichrist" to refer to a surge of consciousness that brings people beyond Christolotry into a fuller state of conscious participation in the <u>living</u> God; "Antichrist is then synonomous with the "Second Coming of women."53 Therefore, in Daly-language, sisterhood is "Antichurch," in that it speaks of a profound struggle with the destructive patriarchal church. Sisterhood becomes a "Cosmic

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50 Daly, p. 21.

51 Daly, p. 36.

52 Daly, p. 97.

53 Daly, p. 96.

Church," creating an "Antiworld," by renaming the cosmos.54

Daly emphasizes not only the need for new authentic naming by women, but also stresses multi-faced communication through shapes, colors, and movement, and notes the importance of listening and silence.

> Women are starting to know the defects of language because it is not our own. It reflects the structures blessed by male religion. In order to say that women's speech breaks out of these bounds I have called it silence. It is silence in the sense of going beyond inauthentic speech, but to those who know only inauthentic speech it is meaningless.55

Rosemary Radford Ruether

Taking a somewhat middle ground among the feminist theologians is Rosemary Radford Ruether. A professor at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, Ruether has written and edited volumes on many aspects of women and religion, liberation theology, and the link between ecology and feminism. Her position on religious language is best articulated in Sexism and God-Talk (1983).

Putting the issue in historical perspective, Ruether notes that archeological evidence points to the most ancient images of the divine as female.56 Ancient agrarian societies encompassed

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54 Daly, p. 136.

55 Daly, p. 152.

56 Rosemary Radford Ruether, Sexism and God-Talk (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983) p. 48.

seasonal processes of nature in their images of the fertility goddess. This image of the divine was "Primal Matrix"--the womb from which all things were generated. "Here the divine is not abstracted into some other world beyond this earth but is the encompassing source of new life that surrounds the present world and assures its continuance."57 Ruether contends that this image survives in the idea of God as Ground of Being. Here matter is imbued with the powers of life and spirit, and spirit and matter are not split hierarchically.58

With the onset of early urbanization, the image of the divine changed to take on characteristics of the ruling class: sovereign, all-powerful, requiring service from the subjects. Yet, ancient Near Eastern religion retained two myths which prevented the onset of dualisms of gender or nature/spirit. One myth (the Marduk-Tiamat story) has a younger god subduing and ordering the primary matter of chaos, signified by the old mother goddess.

> This could have been used as a symbol of female defeat by patriarchy, but is balanced by the myth of the dying and rising God-king, his rescue by and marriage with the Goddess, in which the ancient primacy of the Goddess is carried over and made a positive force in the renewal of life of urban agricultural society.59

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57 Ruether, p. 48.

58 Ruether, p. 49.

59 Ruether, p. 52.

Ruether finds "male monotheism" historically peculiar, in that its one-gender imaging of God is a departure from previous human consciousness. It rose out of a herding society, which lacked the female gardening role agrarian societies had. Herders often clashed with agrarians, and viewed God as Sky-Father. "God is modeled after the partriarchal ruling class and is seen as addressing this class of males directly, adopting them as his "sons." They are his representatives, the responsible partners of the covenant with him."60 Women, children and servants represent those ruled over and owned by the patriarchal ruling class. The symbolic heirarchy of God-male-female is created. Women are to relate to men as men relate to God; women are connected to God thru the male. The "masculine" nature becomes identified with the God-image and a spiritual nature, while the "feminine" is associated with a lower material nature. "Gender becomes a primary symbol for the dualism of transcendence and immanence, spirit and matter."61

While the God of Yahwism had overwhelming male characteristics, Yahweh occasionally took on mother-like characteristics such as compassion and mercy, which come from the Hebrew root rechem, or womb.62 Also, Hebrew scripture includes

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60 Ruether, p. 53.

61 Ruether, p. 54.

62 Ruether, p. 56.

Wisdom, described as feminine. But here the Wisdom goddess becomes a dependent attribute or expression of the transcendent male God rather than an autonomous, female manifestation of the divine.63 In the New Testament, Christ/Logos (masculine representation) replaces Wisdom as God's presence in creation, while the Holy Spirit picks up many of the Hebraic traditions of the female Sophia nad Hokmak (spirit).64 Although the Christian God/Christ was also usually referred to as male, some apocryphal and Gnostic writings, as well as some churh fathers and mystics, worshiped God or a trinity with feminine attributes.

Ruether is aware of many feminist's efforts to re-name and re-image God. Contemporary feminist religion which attempts to replace a male God with a revived female Goddess from antiquity, and which idealizes the "feminine" nature, is wrong in Ruether's view. These attempts are simply reinforcing a modern dualism which was not present in the religion of the Goddess. "The result is the creation of a Goddess religion that is the reverse of patriarchal religion."65 Ruether also assails attempts which deliniate the Trinity as comprised of two male (Father and Son) and one female (Spirit) parts of the divine. This too easily falls into a male-dominant relationship, where the female side of

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63 Ruether, p. 57.

64 Ruether, p. 59.

65 Ruether, p. 52.

God becomes subordinate to the dominant male image, she suggests.66 Nor are attempts at divine androgyny appropriate, in Ruether's view.

> We should guard against concepts of divine androgyny that simply ratify on the divine level the patriarchal split of the masculine and feinimine....For feminist to appropriate the "feminine" side of God within this patriarchal gender heirarchy is simply to reinforce the problem of gender stereotyping on the level of God-language.67

Ruether suggests that the God-image which should be adopted is an amalgamation of the Prophetic God and the Liberating Sovereign. The God of the Old Testament prophets is one which adopts a tribe which identifies itself as liberated slaves. Prophets spoke God's protest against oppression by the patriarchical, urban, land-owning society. There is a strong Biblical motif of protest against the status quo of ruling-class privlege and the deprivation of the poor. These prophets did not speak of gender oppression because they did not see how their own culture subjugated women. They also knew of rich queens and rulers so they did not associate women with oppressed peoples. As Ruether points out,

> ...indeed, perhaps it was not until the early modern period that the perception of women as marginalized by gender became stronger than the perception of women as divided by class. Only then could a feminist movement arise that protested the

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66 Ruether, p. 60.

67 Ruether, p. 61.

subjugation of women as a group.[68]

The New Testament radicalized this prophetic consciousness, and included class, ethnic, and gender oppression.

Besides this Prophetic God, Ruether points to the importance of the Liberating Sovereign. This tradition emphasizes how one's relationship with the Divine as Abba, a close father, liberates one from kinship ties. A new family is created based on mutual service, not bonds to human kings and fathers. Unfortuantely, when the new community becomes an accepted part of society, a new hierarchary develops with new fathers and kings which disintegrate the sense of autonomy. "In order to preserve the prophetic social relationships, we need to find a new language that cannot be as easily co-opted by the systems of domination."[69]

Ruether emphasizes the need to be cautious of idolatry. No representation of God should be taken literally, she says, and both pictoral and verbal imaging of God is idolatry.

> God is both male and female and neither male nor female. One needs inclusive language for God that draws on the images and experiences of both genders. This inclusiveness should not become more abstract. Abstractions often conceal androcentric assumptions and prevent the shattering of the male monopoly on God-language, as in "God is not male. He is Spirit." Inclusiveness can happen only by naming God/ess in

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68 Ruether, p. 63.

69 Ruether, p. 66.

female as well as male metaphors.70

"If all language for God/ess is analogy, if taking a particular human image literally is idolatry, then male language for the divine must lose its priviledged place."71 Ruether suggests using metaphors (such as those in the New Testament) which draw on feminine roles and experience, and are drawn from activities of peasants and working people. "Adding an image of God/ess as loving, nurturing mother, mediating the power of the strong, sovereign father, is insufficient."72 She warns of the dangers of the parent model of the divine, which turns God into a neurotic parent who does not want children to become autonomous and responsible for their own lives. "Patriarchal theology uses the parent image for God to prolong spiritual infantilism as virtue and to make autonomy and assertion of free will a sin."73

Ruether's answer to the image/language question is to "start with language for the Divine as redeemer, as liberator, as one who fosters full personhood and, in that context, speak of God/ess as creator, as source of being."74 A reaffirmation of

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70 Ruether, p. 67.

71 Ruether, p. 69.

72 Ruether, p. 69.

73 Ruether, p. 69.

74 Ruether, p. 71.

the God of Exodus will reject dualism of nature and spirit, idealizing stereotyped qualities of neither "masculine" nor "feminine". Ruether seeks a harmonization of self and body, self and other, and self and world. Although she uses "God/ess" to name this integrated divinity, she admits that "we have no adequate name for the true God/ess, the 'I am who I shall become.' Intimations of Her/His name will appear as we emerge from false naming of God/ess modeled on patriarchal alientation."75

EVALUATION OF FEMINIST THEOLOGIANS

The above feminist theologians offer both startling and constructive recommendations for the evolution of traditional religious language. Such a vigorous critique of patriarchy is valuable because it points toward a better vision for humanity. These theologians offer insight which helps women affirm their lives and spiritual searchings. Through this, they strengthen the spiritual community.

Although their criticisms of the destructive effect of male-imaged God-language are well-taken, their positions are not beyond question. Like other feminist theologians, their extreme positions can become counter-productive to the goals of an uplifting feminist-influenced religion. General criticism of the more radical feminist theolgians is based on a number of

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75 Ruether, p. 71.

potentially weakening points.

First, there is the question of priority and emphasis underlying these theologies. Some feminist theologians seem to put their identity as women above all other personal identities, and call on other women to do likewise. One's sense of "women's consciousness" seems to be the overriding identity to which all other experience is compared and verified. A danger is that "women's consciousness" itself will become a stereotypical category rather than a tool to break beyond traditionally defined ideas of sex roles. This could prove destructive for the development of true human liberation and identity which many feminist theologians espouse. Affirming one's identity as a woman or man is necessary in order to understand and affirm one's humanness; this is also true for affirming one's identity as of a certain ethinic group, race, or age. Yet the overconsciousness of one's idenity with a specific group is counter-productive when the goal is a total human family. While noting individuality affirms self-identity, equating one's whole character with one's "differentness" can lead to exclusivism, arrogance, and separation. The most extreme outcome of over-emphasizing "woman's consciousness" is that one's ultimate source of meaning and affirmation becomes rooted in one's sex, rather than in God. Turning any "gender consciousness" into ultimate concern can defeat the purpose of feminist theolgians who see, through God, a higher mode of life for humanity.

Related to this criticism of gender-identity as ultimate

identity is a concern over feminist theologians' source of religious authority. When "women's experience" becomes the norm against which all religious experience is compared, faith becomes a the subjective experience of a single group. Some feminist theologians dismiss scripture completely as any measuring stick for truth or goodness. Another problem with the emphasis on experience is that women's experience and vision of life is not homogeneous. Women in one culture's socio-economic strata may have similar experiences, yet using women's common experience as a foundation for religious meaning or expression no more guarantees the creation of a single Feminist Theology than does its use of men's common experience. By emphasizing a single supposedly authentic "women's experience," feminist theologians risk excluding not only men, but also the very women they seek to unite.

With the problem of imbuing personal experience with religious authority comes the tendency toward attributing God with complete immanence, and denying that God is any "other." Some feminst theologians wholeheartely support a change in the concept of God issuing forth from a change in language for God. As Carol Ochs states, "We, all together, are part of the whole, the All in All. God is not father, nor mother, nor even parents, because God is not other than, distinct from or opposed to creation."76 In their effort to reinterpret God in light of

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76 Carol Ochs, Behind the Sex of God (Boston: Beacon Press, 1977) p. 137.

contemporary human experience, God can become equated with all experience, rather than the controller and creator of that experience. Some feminist theologians' attempts to de-patriarchalize the sovereign detached Sky Father God lean toward pantheism, taking an extreme and questionable step away from Christianity. The issue of affirming God's immanence over transcendence or transcendence over immanence is certainly important to feminist religious language, as will be evidenced later. However, arguing one aspect over and against the other is not the purpose of this discussion. What is necessary is to recognize that transcendence/immanence is one of the issues feminist theology and inclusive language centers around. Some theologies threaten to affirm one at the expense of the other.

These criticisms point to problems in some radical feminist theologies and note potential problems in reformist feminist theologies taken to extremes. Yet the contribution of these theologian's insights and efforts toward inclusive religious language is not completely undercut by these problems. The significance of these theologies will be expounded upon in concluding recommendations. These general criticisms are only one perspective on the feminist theologians. A sharper critique comes from the evangelical perspective. When evangelical Chrsitians see the influence of feminist theology as a serious enough threat to examine and criticize it, feminists calling for language change must take the responsiblity of listening to them. Productive dialogue can occur if feminist theologians defend their stance

against those of traditional or evangelical persuasion who no doubt outnumber them.

AN EVANGELICAL RESPONSE

Despite the appreciable contributions of many feminist theologians, their tendencies toward exclusivity, experiential authority and immanence remain the most debatable points. Yet a host of additional criticisms emerge when feminist theology is viewed from an evangelical Christian perspective. The charge that the adoption of inclusive language will undermine institutions of marriage, the family, and the church are not uncommon from the evangelical ranks. Donald Bloesch ambitiously attacks feminist theology on a number of fronts in his books Is the Bible Sexist? (1982), and The Battle for the Trinity (1985).

According to Bloesch, most feminist theology is heresy and a threat to the biblical Christian faith. In various contexts, Bloesch compares it to Gnosticism, fertility cults, mysticism, monism, Neoplatonism, Nestorianism, process theology and deism. He goes so far as to say that feminist theology is similar to the German Christianity which supported Hitler because the "feminist perversion of the faith" confuses ideology with theology.77 Along with the German Christians, Christian Marxists, and ideological patriarchalists, feminists "have sought to read into

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77 Donald Bloesch, Is the Bible Sexist? (Westchester, Illinios: Crossway Books, 1982) p. 65.

the faith their own ideological commitments."78

> ...academic theology is becoming ever more vulnerable to ideological penetration, and this means that the message of the faith is being adapted, often unwittingly, to the biases of the culture. It is not feminist theology per se, but cultural ideology (democratic egalitarianism, welfare liberalism, populism, ethnocentrism) that poses the principle threat to the faith of the church in Western culture at this time. 79

The strong ideological content in radical feminist theologies convinces Bloesch that the movement is undermining the evangelical Christian faith. Even reformist and some conservative feminist theologies are dismantling fundamental religious symbols, says Bloesch. "Feminists who are closer to the Christian understanding wish to alter the language and imagery, but not the meaning of biblical faith. Yet it can be questioned whether in their attempts at reconceptualization they preserve the basic intent of the biblical authors."80

A number of necessary Christian symbols are at stake, says Bloesch, the most crucial of which is God "the Father," as central figure in the Trinity. Not only is the masculinity of this image necessary to the Christian faith, according to Bloesch, but "Father" preserves the personalness of God which feminist theology tends to reject. Terms such as "God/ess,"

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78 Bloesch, Bible, p. 78.

79 Bloesch, Trinity, p. xvi.

80 Bloesch, Bible, p. 63.

"Holy One," "Creator," or "Source of Being" evoke a God who is impersonal or suprapersonal, detached and removed from the creature. It is impossible, he says, to pray to this God.

> Prayer in the feminists' view is confined to praise and thanksgiving or simply reflection on the mystery of life. But prayer in the sense of bowing down before God and pleading for his mercy and favor signifies from their perspective a throwback to patriarchal and subordinationist modes of thinking. 81

In Bloesch's view, "Father" is also the superior symbol because the analogy contains a univocal meaning.82 Yahweh, the God of the Old Testament, is not only designated as "Father," but declared to be the Father.83 More than a metaphor based in cultural experience, God as "Father" (as well as God as "Son" and "Spirit") is a primal ontological symbol based on divine revelation.84 Calling God "Father" does not mean that God is a sexual being, for God transcends sexuality while encompassing masculinity and femininty, according to Bloesch. Yet, "he chooses to relate himself to us as masculine."85 The "Father/Lord" symbol "embraces the elements of omnipotent or

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81 Bloesch, Bible, p. 64.

82 Bloesch, Bible, p. 76.

83 Bloesch, Trinity, p. 37.

84 Bloesch, Trinity, p. 36.

85 Bloesch, Trinity, p. 33.

absolute power which is a masculine, not a feminine, attribute."86

The symbolism of how God relates to the church is likewise threatened by inclusive God-language, says Bloesch. It should be left untouched because "the church consitutes the feminine dimension of the sacred."87

> God in his relation to us as Creator, Redeemer and Reconciler should always be referred to in masculine imagery, since these roles indicate power, initiative, and superordination.... Yet God in his relation to us as Nurturer, Guide, and Comforter may be envisaged as feminine. This is apparent in his role as the spirit incarnate in the church.88

Bloesch suggests both Wisdom and the Holy Spirit may be referred to as feminine, since the usage has biblical support. Yet any feminine imagery must be secondary to the controlling symbol of God the Father, says Bloesch. "This terminology [for Spirit or Wisdom] still reflects a dependence of the feminine on the masculine and the counter-dependence of the masculine on the feminine in order to realize the masculine goal."89 Bloesch's categories of "masculine" and "feminine" characteristics are quite clear cut and derive from traditional patriarchal biblical thought.

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86 Bloesch, Bible, p. 76.

87 Bloesch, Trinity, p. 33.

88 Bloesch, Bible, p. 72.

89 Bloesch, Bible, p. 73.

> The masculine refers to the movement of God going out of himself to other members of the Trinity and to the world. Here we see creativeness, initiative, and aggressivenes. The feminine refers to the movement of God returning to himself in the role of the Spirit embodied in the church. Here we see receptivity, openness, sponteneity, intuitiveness.90

In addition to asserting that feminist theology threatens both the masculine Father God and feminine Spirit church symbols, Bloesch says that feminist religious language misrepresents Jesus Christ. In referring to Christ in non-heirarchical terms such as "Friend" and in gender-inclusive "Child," feminists are denying Christ as the true God, to whom one must submit to as "Master," "Lord," and "Son of God." "Child of God" calls into question the real incarnation, says Bloesch, since this was in male, not female form.91

> Unless Christ became incarnate in a specific human being, in a specific race, at a specific time, the underlying claims of the Christian faith are subverted. To deny specificity to to deny the incarnation, and to deny the incarnation is to deny the historical character of the Christian religion. We are then in the morass of a pantheistic mysticism which differentiates between the historical Jesus and the eternal Christ and regards the latter alone as the object of faith.92

Some feminists make a distinction between Jesus, who is

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90 Bloesch, Trinity, p. 37.

91 Bloesch, Bible, p. 74.

92 Bloesch, Bible, p. 74.

masculine, and Christ, who is feminine or neuter. Bloesch asserts that Christ does include masculinity and femininity, but this does not warrant change in gender language in reference to Christ.93 "Because he has taken to himself the specific humanity of Jesus, the practice of referring to Christ as feminine and Jesus as masculine (encouraged by some feminists) is dangerously misleading and indeed opens the door to the heresy of Nestorianism [which separated the divine and human natures of Jesus Christ]."94

Encompassing Bloesch's perceived threats to the traditional symbols of Jesus Christ, God the Father, and the Spirit of the church is what he sees as a dismantling of the evangelical doctrine of the Trinity. In Bloesch's words, God must be spoken of with these personal, trinitarian terms because God is not only infinite ground and depth of being, but the all-powerful being who condescends to our level in self-giving love. "The battle to retain the personal categories of Scripture in reference to God is at the same time a battle to preserve the Trinitarian faith of the church through the ages."95

For Bloesch, the members of the Trinity are equal in essence yet divergent in function. He says he agrees with Karl Barth in

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93 Bloesch, Bible, p. 73.

94 Bloesch, Bible, p. 73.

95 Bloesch, Bible, p. 83.

insisting that in God there is a superior and a subordinate.96 In the voluntary subordination of the Son to the Father and the Spirit to the Father and Son is a certain "theological propriety." The "Father," "Son" and "Holy Spirit" names are to be understood analogously. "They signify preeminently what our human notions of fatherhood, sonship and personhood only imperfectly describe."97 The symbol of the Trinity is central to Bloesch's evangelical Christianity, and witnesses to a perceived divine institution of heirarchy and specific male and female roles within it.

> Femininity is grounded in masculinity and not vice versa. This is the plain teaching of Scripture, and this principle applies to the Trinity, to the relationship between Christ and his church,and to man-woman relationships within the family of God and in the world.98

Not only are the actual symbols threatened by feminist inclusive langauge, but larger conceptualization for God are at risk. According to Bloesch, the dangerous effects of change to feminine symbolization for God are it attributes sexuality to a God beyond sexuality, and it denies the transcendence of God in biblical monotheism.99 Feminine desriptions of God are rather a

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96 Bloesch, Bible, p. 69.

97 Bloesch, Trinity, p. 101.

98 Bloesch, Bible, p. 70.

99 Bloesch, Trinity, p. 44.

part of naturistic mysticism and other forms of immanentalism.

> When God is thought of primarily as Mother, we are disposed psychologically to think of creation in terms not of divine fiat or createo ex nihilo but of emanation, since the child is formed from material in the mother. The irresistible tendency is then to look for God within the depths of the soul or of nature rather than in particular events in history where God in his sovereign freedom has chosen to reveal himself.100

When God loses the characther of "otherness," God is perceived in ordinary experience of this world. Here, too, Bloesch criticizes feminist theology's lack of respect for the authority of scripture. In changing biblical symbols, feminists are tampering with a document deemed by evangelicals to be true and applicable always. As Bloesch says, "In my view, the scriptural language will always be normative and relevant because it is God's self-designation through the words of human authors."101

Language other than strictly biblical language may be helpful in making clear that "God of the Bible is much more inclusive and transcendent than the humanly masculine or the culturally patriarchal."102 Yet, Bloesch contends, any supplimental language is further from the true meaning of who God is, and "must be subordinated to anthropomorphic, realistic

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100 Bloesch, Bible, p. 80.

101 Bloesch, Bible, p. 81.

102 Bloesch, Bible, p. 81.

designations of scripture."103 Bloesch and most feminist theolgians simply see the place of the Bible differently. Bloesch assesses the feminists' view of scriptural symbols:

> It seems that for many modern theologians, we are free to choose those symbols that best resonate with modern experience. If our language about God is only metaphorical, then when cultural experience changes we may readily alter the metaphors of faith, since metaphors are only tentative and exploratory, never final or definitive.104

Rather than giving any authority to life experience or acknowledging the influence of culture, Bloesch (in contrast to feminist theologians) views the Bible as the only source of meaning. Bloesch's criterion for deciding which langauge is most appropriate is the "self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ given in the Bible."105

> The biblical words are not merely ciphers of transcendence..., but graphic images that on the whole mean what they say. This is to be understood, most often, not in terms of literal identity, but in terms of a unity of meaning that faith alone can grasp.106

CRITICISMS OF THE EVANGELICAL PERSPECTIVE

Although his discussion captures much of the root of

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103 Bloesch, Bible, p. 81.

104 Bloesch, Trinity, p. 22.

105 Bloesch, Bible, p. 77.

106 Bloesch, Trinity, pp. 24-5.

feminist theology's arguments and his own analysis includes the nuances of the evangelical stance, Bloesch's attacks on feminist theology are not satisfying. Feminist theologians who call for inclusive language will not deny that implicit in this request is a call for a change in the faith itself. Yet far from being outright heretics, many feminist theologians seek to purge traditional Chrsitianity of its patriarchal tendencies. They argue that patriarchy, rather than being a dinively created social system, is only Christianity's historical and cultural sidecar, threatening to veer it off its twentieth century path.

Much of feminist theology does attack hierarchalism and dualism. Bloesch's concern comes because he believes that hierarchalism and dualism are "ideas that belong to the very center of the biblical intepretation of life and history."[107] Here, Bloesch does not recognize that the message of scripture, written in a specifically patriarchal culture, does not necessarily imply that patriarchy is especially holy. Yet Bloesch practically asserts this:

> I believe that the langue of patriarchy was adopted by the Spirit of God in his writing of the Holy Scripture because there is an abiding truth in patriarchy that cannot be lightly dismissed. Patriarchy perserves the biblical principle of an above and a below, of a first and a second, of headship and servanthood. To deny or erase these disctinctions between members of the Trinity or between God and man or bewteen man and woman is to end in a pantheistic monism in which creaturehood

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107 Bloesch, Bible, p. 92.

is swallowed up in deity.108

Bloesch fears that inclusive language use will end in a society full of sexual promiscuity and perversion, which ensues from social egalitarianism, which he believes is not biblical. "Just as the kingdom of God is opposed to egalitarian democracy, so the Christian family is opposed to the democratic family where all share equally in leadership responsiblities."109

Bloesch's idea of the Kindgom of God and the activity of Christianity is definitely a different interpretation than my own or many feminist theologians'. Not only is the much quoted Galations 3:28 (There is no longer Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, man nor women, but all are one in Christ) evidence against this stratification of the sexes and society; also, Jesus' ministry to women and men, his affirmation of various women's roles (Mary and Martha story), and his final call to his disciples as friends as well as servants can be interpreted to support a Christian faith which is concerned about and the equality of persons.

Oddly, Bloesch does assert that the religion transforms patriarchy:

> While patriarchal symbols were used to represent God, these symbols were radically transformed. Christianity challenged autocratic patriarchy by putting human fatherhood in second place. Cultural ideas of lordship were also transformed, for Christ chose to realize his

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108 Bloesch, Bible, p. 79.

109 Bloesch, Bible, p. 88.

lordship in the role of servant.110

While insisting that masculine symbols still be used because patriarchy is an "abiding truth," Bloesch does not fully acknowledge the transforming power of the Christian message he alludes to here. One wonders why, if the symbols were transformed by the events, the symbols themselves are not actually changed to embody the transformation.

Bloesch's emphasis on the inerrancy and authority of the Bible borders on idolatry, a worship of scripture rather than an all-powerful God. According to Bloesch, "...scriptural language is not just an accidental garb for the message of faith, but a divinely prepared and divinely inspired medium; and apart from the medium there is no message."111 Here, Bloesch suggests that God uses only one medium; this limits the power and potential of God to speak to humanity through many avenues.

Besides asserting the truth of hierarchical patriarchy, Bloesch also presumes specific personality characteristics of "masculine" and "feminine." When God is masculine, Bloesch sees creativeness, initiative, and agressiviness. When God is feminine, Bloesch sees receptivity, openness, spontenaity, and intuitiveness. In this, he assumes traditional sexual stereotypes which frequently do not coincide with male/female characteristics today.

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110 Bloesch, Trinity, p. 40.

111 Bloesch, Bible, p. 76.

Under scrutiny, Bloesch's statements also show a remnant of the myth of exclusively male parenthood. "...a God who creates by the sheer act of his will is more appropriately termed 'Father Almighty'... than 'Mother.'"[112] Bloesch's interpretation of the biblical analogies would work if men could be independently creative and women could not. The fact is that neither men nor women can be singularly willful creators when it comes to parenting, while both can independently create, as God does, in other artful and productive ways.

Criticism of Bloesch's evangelical perspective attacks issues of religious authority and the relationship between the Kingdom and the world. Chances are that these debates will not soon be resolved, but if feminists seriously seek to transform society, the dialogue must continue.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The significance of the movement toward inclusive language is often overlooked as church leaders occasionally casually change "he" to "she or he." But it is important that all those affected by the request that language be changed understand the potentially transforming power it has for Christianity. "'Inclusivity' is revealed as involving more than a recipe of 'add women and stir' so as to come out with the same batter (or interpretation of the tradition) as before; there is the dawning

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112 Bloesch, Bible, p. 80.

realization that the old patriarchal batter may be changed in the process."113

Whenever language is changed, meaning is changed. This is true especially if the new words are more than synonyms for the old. Rather than viewing inclusive language as a threat the traditional Christianity, it should be seen as an opportunity to revitalize and purify the faith.

In hope of revitalization, inclusive language offers the opportunity to make religious language alive and meaningful for today's believers. Not a few Christians have trouble understanding traditional terms such as "Kingdom of God," "atonement," "redemption" or even "sin." Similarly, terminology for God as "Father" has often ceased to be meaningful. God as "Father" "has become so familiar a statement about God that it has ceased to be figurative; it has almost become a dead metaphor, and it fails to surprise the way good metaphors do." 114

As society continues to deviate from patriarchalism, more religious metaphors become obscured. For example, the metaphor of Christ as the bridegroom of the church has ceased to be meaningful to many who are unfamiliar with traditional roles in marriage . In order for metaphor to work well, the object of

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113 Karen Bloomquist, "Help or Hindrance to Feminist Theology?," Dialog 24 (Winter 1985) p. 51.

114 Gracia Grindal, "Reflections on God 'the Father'," Word and World (Winter 1984) p. 80.

comparison should be visible in the world. I contend that here the original comparison no longer exists. No longer are men as grooms always the pursuer of the beloved bride. And in marriage, women are not as often placed in subordinate roles to serve as passive recipients of men's affection, protection and economic support. While this societal change does not invalidate the metaphor (the church may remain in a receptive, submissive role in relation to Christ as head), it does make such an image inaccessable to many believers. To reassert what Mary Daly observes, "Religious symbols fade and die when the cultural situation that gave rise to them and supported them ceases to give them plausibility."115

As we come to recognize dead metaphors, we are faced with the challenge and opportunity to create new ones. I suggest these new images should re-emphasize aspects of God which patriarchal symbols have ignored. "By claiming the male experience to be normative for faith, and by naming the deity as male, we have overemphasized strength and aggressiveness and denied--indeed, repressed--many expressions of faith that focus on God's self-giving, self-emptying love." 116 New symbols can express not only the "feminine" aspects of God, but the lost significance of God as liberator, transcendent and immanent,

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115 Daly, p. 15.

116 Pamela Payne Allen, "Taking the Next Step in Inclusive Language," The Christian Century (April 23, 1986) p. 411.

relational, working through a theology of the cross.

A re-interpretion of the Trinity is a good beginning point in this transformation. Rather than insisting that the Trinity legitimizes heirarchalism and patriarchalism, as does Bloesch, the Trinity can be understood to emphasize the relational aspect of God and God's concern for justice. In the Trinity, God functions as creator, redeemer and sustainer. The three "persons" exist in relation to their common nature and as a community.117 This understanding is especially signficant for many women, who through history have found identity in relationships and interconnected experiences, whereas many men have traditionally found identity in experience based in hierarchy and power.

> Trinitarian theology asserts that relationship is fundamental to God and that community is the foundation of God's interaction with the world. Instead of an unmoved mover, God as community calls us to shared responsiblity.118

This view of the Trinity has direct implications for society. In one sense, "the community of God is the Trinity--a uniquely Christian way of confessing our faith about the very nature of Godself and the ramifications of that confession for

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117 Barbara Brown Zickmund, "The Trinity and Women's Experience," The Christian Century (April 15, 1987) p. 355.

118 Zickmund, p. 356.

discipleship."119

Another interpretation of the Trinity says that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit originally function in the Bible to show the consistency of the divine will toward justice.120 "Trinitarian thought should force us beyond our usual human categories, asking us to intuit a manyness-in-unity far beyond our experience, yet communicated to us in the deepest reality of communal justice."121 Recapturing the biblical connotations of Father, Son and Spirit will image an "unmale God" who speaks to us of radical communities of justice created through the Spirit.122

Used in this light, the Trinitarian terms Father, Son and Holy Spirit do not encourage sexism or limit women's activity in Christian community. If these meanings surface, it is not necessary to dismiss so rich a symbol as the Trinity. Interpretations which reinforce patriarchal ideology must be revealed for what they are and then dismanteled if Trinity is to be an affirmative symbol in Christian's lives.

Religious language can also improve rather than confuse the question of transcendence and immanence. Both implementing a

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119 Zickmund, p. 356.

120 Marjorie Suchocki, "The Unmale God: Reconsidering the Trinity," Quarterly Review (Spring 1983), p. 44. See article for detail of this assertion.

121 Suchocki, p. 48.

122 Suchocki, p. 44.

theology of the cross and avoiding pronouns for God help to balance the "otherness" and "indwellingness" of God.

Bloesch suggests that naming God "Mother" or "she" implies God's closeness to the natural world and denies transcendence. While the former can be granted, considering the connotations of much feminine God-language, the latter does not necessarily follow. Much of Christianity needs to reemphasize God's relationship to humanity and the natural world, and reaffirm the original goodness of creation. Referring to God as "Mother" can be useful for this. However, casual references to God as "she" do not offer the same potential. Using "she" simply balances gender references for God or startles listeners from the all-too-comfortable masculine image of God. This can be helpful, but avoiding pronouns for God whenever possible will have an even better effect.

The Hebrew designation for God (YHWH) recognized God's holiness, and that the name of God was too holy to pronounce. Modern Christianity would benefit by reclaiming some of that sense of mystery and holiness about God. Using "God" rather than pronouns "he" or "she" can help to affect this.

> If we eliminate all pronouns for God, we confess the Godness of God. The uniqueness of the divine nature is such that no human pronoun is adequate to designate this deity. Why not allow that theological reality to be reflected in an unusual use of language in which pronouns are simply not used? 123

While some would argue that pronoun use connotes the personalness

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123 Suchocki, pp. 45-6.

of God, it also connotes a specific gender which is not of God. Accurately addressed, God is really neither "he" nor "she." The most neutral, though quite unpoetic, name for God is "God." God's more personal characteristics, reflected in human personality, can still be brought out through the use of terms such as "Parent," "Nurturer," "Protector," and "Guide." These are richer than pronouns, and do not reduce God to an ambiguous "he" or "she." When God is God and not man, worship can emerge more vibrantly. Allowing God to be God may encourage awe, love, and obedience which may be missing from religion which emphasizes the immanence of God.

Rather than destroying the message of Christianity, some feminist theologians' suggestions for inclusive language encourage a truer Christian faith which is as committed to Jesus' witness and the spirit of scripture as Bloesch's evangelicalism. Central here is a theology of the cross, an awareness of how God's activity through history is manifested in acts which appear contrary to conventional ideas of goodness and righteousness.

> In what we regard as contrary to the divine, God becomes visible...not through what human beings have created, reified or assumed to be "of God" --which today would include the structures of racism, sexism and imperialism. Hence, God is not revealed through the male-ensconsed values of our society (especially mastery and power over.)124

God's activity of turning the world upside down is at work in feminist Christians' attempts to shake Christianity out of

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124 Bloomquist, p. 51.

patriarchy's grip. "The cross reveals the true God, who refuses to be aligned with male privilege and power, but rips, pierces, and shatters the many manifestations of patriarchy." 125

Through this, God's way of working in opposites, God's otherness is revealed. Divine activity moves beyond any predictable human efforts. Yet in this same activity, God's immancence is affirmed. God is "immanently with us, revealed through our experiences of the contradicitons."126 As women begin to recognize Christian faith experience as their own, they recognize that they, too, are created in the image of God. With this consciousness of imago dei, women and men will be able to sense God's presence with them, while God continues to be "other."

Language changes such as those suggested above can begin to transform the meanings of traditional Christian symbols, images and metaphors into something more which more closely connects with the spirit of the Christian story. Using new metaphors which are aligned with contemporary experience of women and men can add vitality to the faith. Such efforts can also help to break down stereotypes of what is traditionally "masculine" and "feminine," opening the way for freedom from cultural powers which stifle the potential for humanness as intended in creation. Re-discovering feminine imagery already present in scripture can

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125 Bloomquist, p. 15.

126 Bloomquist, p. 51.

help affirm women's identity as valuable creations of God, while helping men reassess their own place in Christian community. Emphasizing God's will for justice and God's presence in community can help instill a faith which is less dualistic, affirms the original value of the material world, and which embodies Christ at work in saving lives as well as souls.

The presentation of a number of feminist theologies and the evangelical critique instills both an optimism for and commitment to the feminist's cause, while it brings out an attitude of caution in those who believe in the abiding value of the Christian faith. Feminist theology and inclusive language offer a chance for reformation and rejuvination of a Christianity stained by patriarchy and idolatry. Yet feminists, too, are at risk of creating and naming God in their own image. Here, the only insurance against misrepresenting the faith is prayer for and receptivity to the guidance of God. Ultimately, women and men must let God be God, and trust that God's will and truth will prevail in spite of all inadequate human attempts to name the Holy One.

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