Language in Church

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This controversial question is discussed by the Professor of Linguistic Science in the University of Reading. This feature first appeared in *The Tablet* and is reprinted here with permission.

If recent press reports are anything to go by, we are in danger of succumbing to another close encounter with religious fanaticism – of the linguistic kind. Linguistic fanaticism occurs whenever one section of society tries to impose its linguistic will upon everyone else, invariably losing all sense of priorities and tolerance in the process. It can happen anywhere, any time. There has long been a tribe of *only*-haters (those whose self-appointed task is to seek out and destroy misplaced adverbs). More recently, there have emerged the *hopefully*-snipers; and now, more strident than all who have gone before, there are the *(s)he*-hunters. Religious language discussion has not seen anything like it for years— not since the ferocious *thou/you* arguments, which you will remember if you are over the age of – well, anyway, they seem dated now.

The issue is simply put. Should we not, in these days of female equality, eliminate the male bias in religious linguistic expression – a bias, it is said, which is shown by the regular use of *he* to refer to God, by such invocations as *Almighty Father,* and by such general references as *mankind* and *the Son of Man?* Should not these be replaced by non-sexist locutions (such as *the human race* for *mankind*), and new prayers and hymns written in a feminine idiom, drawing attention to the motherhood of God, and using *she* as often as *he?* There are evidently a large number of people – mainly (but by no means entirely) women – who think yes. There are also a large number of people – mainly (but by no means entirely) men – who think either no, or that the whole issue is silly.

My own view is that the issue was by no means silly, to begin with, but is in danger of becoming worse than silly, now. What began as a healthy and constructive awareness of the limitations of language has degenerated into a shifty and humourless self-consciousness about sexist expression. Whereas the role of religious linguistic debate should be to open doors to new roomfuls of meaning, the current fashion of *(s)he*-hunting slams them shut, by focusing on the forms of language at the expense of the meanings. Religious language always fails in its purpose when it draws too much attention to itself and thus takes attention away from the realities it attempts to convey.

Let us look first at the background to the situation. There are several strands in the history of the sexual linguistic revolution. Most obviously, there was the feminist movement of the 1960s: in this country, a little less obviously, there were such developments as the Trades Descriptions Act. Language, thought and social identity are so closely related that it was only natural for criticisms of social or economic inequalities and injustices to spread to the language which expressed them – and which thus seemed to sanction them. Language, moreover, was an easy, tangible target. It focused the problem in a way that other issues could not. Notions such as 'equal status' or 'equal responsibility' are difficult to identify clearly. It is so easy to get lost in the accompanying rhetoric. But sentences such as 'She has been appointed chairman' are able to concentrate the mind wonderfully. In the 1960s, one of the most dominant features of the feminist movement was the sound of linguistic hackles rising.

Catch 22

The result is well-known – a force for linguistic change which has no precedent this century. Most noticeably, it affected the field of vocabulary. There are only a few dozen words which contain an unambiguous reference to their natural gender in English *(bachelor, father, queen, monk, bride, hostess, widower, girlfriend, waiter. . .),* but some of them *(man,* especially) are used frequently, so that if one of these words is attacked on the grounds that it expresses a hidden bias, the problem is often before us. There is no problem with words which have an 'equal' symmetrical status, such as *king* and *queen.* The problem arises only with those words which have developed a double function in English, referring both to one sex within a species, and to the species as a whole. In theory, either the male or the female term could be used for the general sense – the 'unmarked' term, as linguists say. In practice, apart from a few words which show a feminine bias (such as *cow* and *nurse*). English uses the masculine words as 'unmarked'. Nor is it just human beings who are affected by the bias: *dog* refers to both the male of the species (as distinct from *bitch)* and to the species as a whole (as in *dog show.)* Grammar too is affected, through the pronoun system. The masculine pronouns *(he, him,* and so on) are the unmarked forms. Thus we can say *He's a nice lad* amongst *Since man began to use tools, he. . .* and use *he* as the traditional way of continuing an indefinite expression: *If anyone leaves, he'll regret it.*

The new forms and shifts in nomenclature which quickly emerged were sometimes hardly noticed (*salesmen/ saleswomen* becoming s*h*op assistants: *authoresses* and *manageresses* losing their endings), but sometimes (as with *Ms* or *–person)* the forms become a source of fierce pride or indignation, depending on your point of view. You cannot avoid taking sides, in these matters. If you are against *person,* or don't care, then you are sexist, they (feminine) say. If you are for it, then you are sexist, they (masculine) say. And a position of linguistic hermaphroditism does not help. 'Don't knows' are attacked by extremists on both sides. Catch 22.

What is at stake?

In due course, it was noticed that religious language was just as sexist as any other variety – in fact, it was said to be more so, on account of its reliance on a male-dominated tradition rooted in the patriarchal societies of biblical times. The evidence for this view rests mainly on the repeated references to *mankind, father, Lord* Jesus saving *all men,* and the many other masculine terms which have been devised to express the personal basis of the relationship between God and humanity. Nor is it simply a matter of single words: whole systems of metaphorical expression have been created. For instance, the metaphor of God as *king* is part of a network of words, such as *mighty, strong, judge, condemn, heavenly throne. . .* which by association 'spread' the implication of maleness throughout the language.

There is a large literature around this point, these days – inevitably, but unfortunately, largely written by women, and characterised by a frequent use of such phrases as 'As a woman'. I say unfortunately, because the sooner this

state of affairs can be left behind the better. I am not a woman, let it be known, but I too regret the way the female perspective is subordinate in religious language. 'Regret' is too weak: I miss it. If metaphors for talking about God come from human experience (and where else can they come from?), then I really do miss the possible worlds which are waiting to be explored because we do not use routinely the powerful female images and associations which life makes available to all of us, man and woman alike. Some of them are to be found in the Old Testament, some in the New — God as protector, nourisher, life giver, vine, living fountain, dove. . . More than passive images are involved: alongside Mary the humble, we have Mary the magnificent. And the 'God as Mother' debate, which surfaced in *The Times* in October last year, recalls that there is a history of spiritual thought in which the symbolism of God's motherhood is recognised as a valuable source of potential illumination.

We can all learn so much from a feminist perspective. Which is why I, for one, regret the way in which things seem to have gone so badly wrong.

And things have gone wrong. For a while, I collected the crazier of the suggestions which were being made. *Our Parent* for *Our Father. Lord and*

Lady of all creation. The idea that all supernatural beings — the devil included— should be de-masculinated. It was not surprising to find people beginning to mock the whole concept of sexist language, especially when so many of the proposals were just plain — to borrow another term much-used by linguists — daft. 'Solutions' to the *he/she* dilemma have included one proposal to use *he* on the left-hand pages of books, and *she* on the right, another to resuscitate Anglo-Saxon *mon,* and several others to invent a brand-new sexless pronoun — the most famous being *co,* the form chosen by a town committee in Twin Oaks (USA) to replace *he/she.*

I got thoroughly depressed. At the same time I was impressed, as a linguistic observer, by the speed with which professionals have been influenced by the pressures. It normally takes a lot longer for society to bend before a linguistic breeze. But when it is a force 10 gale. . . Bible translators, hymnal revisers, bidding prayer constructors — all have begun to look nervously over their shoulders. And I mean nervously. I have heard priests in the pulpit apologise for points of phrasing. I have seen the defensive reactions of those who have been given the task of 'desexing' hymns. I have heard the biblical scholars com-

plain. One translator told me how much time his team were wasting trying to find compromise linguistic solutions— solutions, he said, which would probably attract as much hate mail from anti-feminists as the hate mail he was getting already from the pro-feminist lobby. 'Hate mail?' I hear you query. It can be just that.

Is it too late to make a plea to religious feminists for moderation, and to religious anti-feminists for understanding? There is more at stake than may at first appear. In the secular domain, people are concerned with this issue of language because they have views about the equality of woman and man in society. This is important in religious society too, but in the religious context, we need to go deeper than this. The linguistic legacy of feminism should be to remind us of the dangers of using God-language which is stereotyped, complacent, automatic, thoughtless. It can, if we let it teach us a lesson about the need to transcend the limitations of human linguistic norms, as we all, in our search for God, strive to say what cannot be said.

But will we let it? Only, I submit, if those who seek for change stop alien-ating all and sundry by trying to force their linguistic will on to everyone else in the shortest possible time.