Gender and the Trinity: An Analysis of Feminist, Traditional and Alternative Approaches

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Is God male, female, both or neither? This article describes contemporary approaches to gender within the Trinity and argues that Moltmann's proposal merits further consideration.

The Feminist Trinity

Proponents of a feminist understanding of the Trinity insist that the names of the persons of the Trinity perpetuate male hierarchy and domination over women.[1] The feminist's concern is that the persons of the Godhead are considered male in Christian language. This is mainly in response to the pronouns assigned to the first and second persons of the Trinity: God the Father and God the Son.[2]

In addition, feminist theologians claim that the language used to describe God is entirely metaphorical.[3] For them, God is a mysterious being who cannot be fully known; thus modifying the names of the Trinity to be more gender inclusive is deemed appropriate.[4] Such modifications of Trinitarian language include: Mother, Lover and Friend; Creator, Liberator and Comforter; or Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer, to name

[1] Mary Daly, "The Qualitative Leap Beyond Patriarchal Religion," *Quest* (Women and Spirituality) 1 (1974): 21.

[2] The Holy Spirit is given special status by some feminist theologians; as the Spirit is seen as contributing to the femininity of the Trinity. Thus, concern for the maleness of the Spirit is not as pronounced in feminist theology. Elizabeth Achtemeier, "Exchanging God for 'No Gods': A Discussion of Female Language for God," in *Speaking the Christian God: The Holy Trinity and the Challenge of Feminism*, ed. Alvin F. Kimmel, Jr., (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 1–16.

[3] Achtemeier, "Exchanging God for 'No Gods'," 3.

[4] Bacon concludes that our conception of God must be "generous in its imaginings," in order to encapsulate the experiences of both men and women. In addition, Bacon is not as liberal in her approach to the Trinity as other feminist theologians. She claims that changing the language we use to talk about the Godhead may be helpful for women, but she suggests that how one thinks, in one's inward thoughts, about the Trinity is more important. Hannah Bacon, "Thinking the Trinity as Resource for Feminist Theology Today?" *CrossCurrents* 62.4 (2012): 442.

but a few.[5] In feminist circles, masculine titles for the Trinity are rejected in favour of feminine or neuter names.

Feminist theologians also question the use of the term "fatherhood" to describe how we live in relationship with God as his children. Some feminists point to Scriptural descriptions of God relating to his people in a motherly posture to refute the "fatherhood" of God (Isa 49:15; Isa 66:13; Matt 23:37; Deut 32:18). According to feminists, the divine fatherhood of God is simply another way in which oppressive male patriarchy is made normative in Christianity.

The assertions of feminist thinkers have not gone unchallenged. Theologians from conservative and liberal backgrounds have attempted to address the claims of the feminist view, and have presented arguments in favour of the traditionalist approach.

The Traditionalist Approach

Incarnation: A Starting Point

James B. Torrance in his seminal work, *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace*, makes a statement reminiscent of Barthian thought when he writes: "In theology our knowledge of God as Father is derived from his self-revelation in Jesus Christ."[6] For Torrance, the incarnation is the logical starting point for exploring what is known about the relationship between God the Father and God the Son, and the names given to the first two persons of the Trinity.

The Person of Father

According to Torrance, God has named himself "Father" in and through Jesus Christ. Pannenberg summarises this view when he states that: "On the lips of Jesus, 'Father' became a proper name for God."[7] Indeed, in the New Testament, Jesus describes God as "Father" 170 times.[8] Notable instances of Jesus referring to God as "Father" include

[5] Edith M. Humphrey "Why We Worship God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit." *Crux* 32.2 (1996): 9.

[6] James B. Torrance, *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 100.

[7] Wolfgang Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology I*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 262.

[8] Hamerton-Kelly notes that God is always spoken of as "Father" in prayers of the New Testament. Robert Hamerton-Kelly, "God the Father in the Bible," in *God as Father?,* ed. Johannes Baptist Metz & Edward Schillebeeckx (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1981), 98.

his cry of "Abba, Father"[9] in the Garden of Gethsemane and his teaching of the Lord's Prayer to the disciples which he begins with "Our Father." Edith Humphrey highlights Matt 11:27, "No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son … reveals Him," where Jesus states his authority as the Son of God, who is the self-revelation of the Father.[10] Humphrey notes that, in Christ, God the Father is "taking up our human language and teaching us the best way to use it."[11] Jesus, as the Son of God, is giving us the name that God the Father wishes to be called by. The authority of Jesus, as a divine person of the Trinity who is in direct relationship with the Father, is not to be taken lightly, according to traditionalists. If Jesus is God incarnate, the person through whom the invisible God can be seen and known, it seems logical to traditionalists to refer to the invisible God as "Father", just as Jesus demonstrates.

Thus, the traditionalist approach asserts that the economic Trinity is revelatory not only of the Godhead, but also of the names of the persons within it. In addition, Torrance concludes that, while the economic Trinity reveals the names of Father, Son and Spirit, within the immanent Trinity, God the Father and God the Son are eternally Father and Son to each other.[12] Therefore, the Father-Son relationship is not bound by time; it is an eternal aspect of the Godhead. In speaking of God as "Father", Jesus is not introducing a new Deity who only becomes a Father through the incarnation. Jesus is referring to God the Father, who possesses an eternal Fatherhood within the immanent Trinity.[13] The names of "Father" and "Son" are not names or relational terms exclusive to the temporal realm. Through the economic Trinity, the names of the persons of the Trinity have been introduced into our human language, according to proponents

[9] Humphrey notes that it is through the Spirit that Christ, and consequently followers of Christ, are able to cry out "Abba, Father." Thus, the naming of God the Father can be thought of as shared by both the Son and the Holy Spirit. Both the Son and Spirit proclaim the name of the Father. Humphrey, "Why We Worship God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit," 4.

[10] Humphrey, "Why We Worship God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit," 4–5.

[11] Humphrey, "Why We Worship God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit," 5.

[12] Here Torrance is drawing upon the assertions of the Nicene Fathers, who were interested in countering the argument posed by Arianism, that God the Father and God the Son only become "Father" and "Son" through the historical event of incarnation. The Nicene Fathers were insistent upon the eternal existence and begotten-ness of the Father and Son respectively. Torrance, *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace*, 99.

[13] Torrance, *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace*, 99.

of the traditionalist approach. Alvin F. Kimel summarises the above position well in the following statement:

> "Father" is not a metaphor imported by humanity onto the screen of eternity; it is a name and filial term of address revealed by God himself in the person of his Son… No matter how other groups of human beings may choose to speak to the Deity, the matter is already decided for Christians, decided by God himself. To live in Christ in the triune being of the Godhead is to worship and adore the holy Transcendence whom Jesus knows as his Father.[14]

In response to the feminist argument that the pronoun "Father" dredges up oppressive and abusive images or memories for some women, traditionalists do not deny that this may sometimes happen. However, they argue that such images and memories are not representative of God the Father. Torrance suggests that we cannot directly compare our creaturely fatherhood with the fatherhood of God.[15] To understand the fatherhood of God is to understand it "theologically" through the life and words of the incarnate Son, according to Torrance.[16] By the indwelling of the Spirit, the word "Father" is no longer associated with "biological, male, patriarchal, sexist content."[17]

The Person of Son

Incarnational theology also clarifies the name "Son" in reference to the second person of the Trinity. Humphrey notes that it is problematic to assign Christ an unclear gender by naming him "Daughter," or a non-gendered term such as Liberator.[18] She suggests that there is a danger of depersonalising Jesus, when we ignore his gender and refer to him vaguely as Liberator, or Sustainer, or Lover.[19] Assigning a female gender to Christ is also seen as highly problematic by traditionalists, as he is and was an incarnate male. Traditionalists argue that we must not call him "Daughter," as some radical feminists suggest, if his incarnate gender suggests otherwise.

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[14] Alvin F. Kimel, *A New Language for God? A Critique of Supplemental Liturgical Texts*, Prayer Book Studies 30 (Shaker Heights, OH: Episcopalians United, 1990), 11–12.

[15] Torrance, *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace*, 123.

[16] Torrance, *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace*, 123.

[17] Torrance, *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace*, 123.

[18] Humphrey, "Why We Worship God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit," 5.

[19] Humphrey, "Why We Worship God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit," 9.

Rebecca Oxford-Carpenter also suggests that the church has tended to focus on Jesus as a historical male, rather than the "eternal Christ" who is beyond gender.[20] Jesus' maleness, which is of the creaturely realm, is not to be emphasised over his divinity and saving power as the Redeemer of humanity, both male and female. John Thompson addresses the debate in similar terms when he concludes that: "Jesus took upon himself our humanity in male form but shared it simply as a person. The eternal Son was not male."[21]

The Person of the Holy Spirit

In response to the feminist assertion that the Holy Spirit is female in gender, traditionalists suggest that the gender of the Spirit should not be a primary concern in Christian worship.[22] Feminist theologians note that the Holy Spirit is feminine in Hebrew (*ruach*); therefore, they argue that the Spirit incorporates "femaleness" into the Trinity. Hook and Kimel refute this argument in stating that *pneuma*, the Greek word for Spirit, is neuter, and the Latin words for Spirit or Ghost, *spiritus* and *gāst* are masculine.[23] Hook and Kimel also suggest that denoting the Spirit as female, and God the Father and God the Son as male, only serves to emphasise gender in the Godhead.[24] Hook and Kimel affirm the designation of the Spirit as grammatically masculine, similar to the Father and the Son, to reduce comparisons of gender between persons of the Godhead.[25]

Gender in a Genderless God

In addition to claiming that the feminist perspective ignores the importance of revelation and incarnation in the names of the persons of the Trinity, the traditionalists also conclude that feminist theologians emphasise sexuality and gender inappropriately in their doctrine of the Trinity.[26]

Traditionalists argue that feminists are guilty of fashioning God into an image that suits themselves and their agenda for female liberation. Feminists have claimed the authority to make the genderless God into

[20] Rebecca Oxford-Carpenter, "Gender and the Trinity," *ThTo* 41.1 (1984): 11.
[21] John Thompson, "Modern Trinitarian Perspectives," *SJT* 44.3 (1991), 359.
[22] John Thompson, "Modern Trinitarian Perspectives," 360.
[23] It should be noted that Latin was not one of the original languages of Scripture. Donald Hook and Alvin F. Kimel, "The Pronouns of Deity: A Theolinguistic Critique of Feminist Proposals," *SJT* 46.3 (1993): 310.
[24] Hook and Kimel, "The Pronouns of Deity," 311–312.
[25] Hook and Kimel, "The Pronouns of Deity," 313.
[26] Achtemeier, "Exchanging God for 'No Gods'," 4.

the image of gendered humanity, according to traditionalists.[27] Gender is unnecessarily ascribed to the God who transcends gender. Torrance identifies the problem with focusing on the gender of the Godhead in worship. He presents two different types of worship:

> A New Testament understanding of worship … is the gift of participating through the Spirit in the Son's communion with the Father.[28] Here the Spirit lifts us out of any narcissistic preoccupation with ourselves to find our true humanity and dignity in Jesus Christ, in life centred in others, in communion with Jesus Christ and one another, in a loving concern for the humanity of all. The second kind of worship is centred in the self, where we celebrate the self and our own sexuality with a god created in our own image.[29]

Like many traditionalists, Torrance fears that feminists who insist on feminine names for God are not really worshipping God, but are instead worshipping themselves.

In addition, in her presentation of theses on the Trinity, Catherine LaCugna notes that it is impossible to develop a model and description for the immanent Trinity alone. She suggests: "To talk only about the immanent Trinity is misleading because it creates the illusion that one can know God independent of the experience of God, even though knowledge of God for Christians comes only through Christ in the Spirit."[30] Thus, LaCugna's statement is similar to the argument presented by Torrance: creation of one's own Trinity does not acknowledge historical revelation through the economic Trinity.

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[27] In his article, Cartledge presents a fascinating study on the Trinitarian language and beliefs of male and female theology students in the UK. Female students were more drawn to androgynous or feminine designations for God, while male students preferred masculine images of God. Attitudes towards social roles and values (i.e. female ordination) were also found to correlate with preferred images and names for God. Mark J. Cartledge. "God, Gender, and Social Roles: A Study in Relation to Empirical-Theological Models of the Trinity." *Journal of Empirical Theology* 22.2 (2009): 117–141.

[28] Torrance dissects this statement in the early chapters of his book. Torrance, *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace*, 107.

[29] Torrance, *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace*, 107.

[30] Catherine M. LaCugna and Kilian McDonnell, "Returning from 'The Far Country': Theses for a Contemporary Trinitarian Theology." *SJT* 41.2 (1988): 205.

Moltmann: Middle Ground Between Feminist and Traditionalist Approaches

Jürgen Moltmann seems to combine an orthodox doctrine of the Trinity with gender inclusive language, in his conception of the names ascribed to the persons of the Trinity.

First, for Moltmann, the name "Father" is not to be interpreted through the lens of monotheistic patriarchy.[31] Patriarchal culture in ancient times should not dictate the meaning of the name "Father," as the name should be primarily understood in a Trinitarian context. It is a name that cannot be separated from the Trinity, according to Moltmann, because it is by the indwelling of the Spirit and our relationship with Christ through which we can call God "*Abba*, Father."[32] For Moltmann "Father" is an inherently "Trinitarian name."[33]

Secondly, Moltmann suggests that the Father is one who "both *begets* and *gives birth* to his son."[34] Therefore, as a Father who begets his only son, he is a "fatherly Father", and as a Father who gives birth to his only Son, he is a "motherly Father."[35] Moltmann cites the eleventh Council of Toledo (AD 675) as instructive for the two distinctions of "motherly" and "fatherly," as the Council concluded, "we must believe that the Son was not made out of nothing, nor out of some substance or other, but from the womb of the Father (*de utero Patris*), that is that he was begotten or born (*genitus vel natus*) from the Father's own being."[36] Moltmann concludes that God the Father is not to be designated as male, but as bisexual or transsexual.[37] In addition, Moltmann concludes that this conception of God the Father directly contradicts monotheistic patriarchy.

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[31] Jürgen Moltmann, "The Motherly Father: Is Trinitarian Patripassianism Replacing Theological Patriachalism?" in Metz and Schillebeeckx, *God as Father*, 51.

[32] Cartledge, "God, Gender, and Social Roles," 123.

[33] Trinitarian traditionalists would likely agree with Moltmann's assertions. The names of the persons of the Trinity are more than simply names; they are names that denote relationship. The name of "Father" is intrinsically connected to "fatherhood" for example, and the name "Son" is connected to "Sonship." Cartledge, "God, Gender, and Social Roles," 123.

[34] Moltmann, "The Motherly Father," 53.

[35] Moltmann, "The Motherly Father," 53.

[36] Moltmann, "The Motherly Father," 53.

[37] Moltmann's conclusion attempts to bring Trinitarian theology together with an understanding of the nature of the God the Father. His claim that the Father is "bisexual" or "transexual" stands in contrast to the traditionalist approach that suggests that gender should be de-emphasised in the Godhead. Some feminists

Moltmann also extends the idea of "mothering" to the Holy Spirit.[38] He designates the Holy Spirit as the "mother of all lives"[39] because of the role of the Spirit in bringing about new birth in believers. Moltmann views this "as a maternal ministry of the Spirit leading to a brotherly and sisterly community."[40] Therefore, followers of Christ become the children of God, through the working of the Holy Spirit, who is mother to all.[41] In turn, Christian believers become brothers and sisters of the Son.[42]

For Moltmann, uniform masculinity among the persons of the Trinity is not essential. Maleness and femaleness can exist together within the Godhead, according to Moltmann's understanding of the Trinity. Moltmann's approach is more liberal than that of some traditionalists; however, he also does not go quite so far as some radical feminists in assigning different names to the persons of the Trinity.

Moving Forward

The language used to speak about the Triune Godhead is important for a theological understanding of basic doctrines. It informs our doxological language in worship as well as our personal relationship with God. Thus, the conversation between proponents of the different approaches explored above should be done with discernment and in love. All the perspectives presented above contribute something of value to Trinitarian theology. While the feminist approach has undergone much criticism, feminist theologians should be recognised for their intentions to relieve women from oppressive and subordinationist doctrines. In addition, the traditionalist approach has effectively called the Church to recognise the importance of the incarnation and the self-revelation of God in Christ. Moltmann's theology attempts to combine the two, and, importantly, he emphasises that Father, Son and Holy Spirit possess primarily relational names that cannot exist outside the Trinity. In sum, continued scholarship

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may agree with Moltmann's suggestion that motherliness is inherent to God; while others may be unmoved because Moltmann is simply describing an attribute of the Father when he calls Him the "motherly Father." Moltmann, "The Motherly Father," 53.

[38] The understanding of the Holy Spirit as "mother" derives from Syrian Church Fathers. Cartledge, "God, Gender, and Social Roles," 123.

[39] Cartledge, "God, Gender, and Social Roles," 123.

[40] Thompson, "Modern Trinitarian Perspectives," 359.

[41] Thompson, "Modern Trinitarian Perspectives," 359.

[42] Thompson, "Modern Trinitarian Perspectives," 359.

on Trinitarian language will be instructive for the ongoing conversation about gender and the Trinity.

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