SEXIST LANGUAGE IN THEOLOGY?

GEORGE H. TAVARD

Methodist Theological School in Ohio

THE RECENT concern for nondiscriminatory language has arisen out of the newer wave of the woman-liberation movement. Black liberation was not particularly eager to change language, as no pronoun in English, or in any language I am acquainted with, connotes skin pigmentation. The term "black" came to be preferred to that of "negro" for historical, sociological, and psychological reasons, not for linguistic motives. But "she" connotes femininity and "he" connotes masculinity; "man" is used as a generic term including male and female and it also designates the male of the race. Thus the woman movement is brought to questioning, not this or that word fashion, but the very structure of language: "the problem of 'desexing language' has taken on particular importance. In North America women are seeking to find *human pronouns* which clearly interpret the fact that men and women are included in the words expressed."[1] This is not a good formulation of the question, since words themselves never interpret their own content. But it is a good indication of the range of problems that are now being faced. At a low level of sophistication, some publishers try to solve the problem by omission: authors will simply not use certain words. Thus, McGraw-Hill's guidelines to authors state: "The English language lacks a generic singular pronoun signifying he or she . . ." and give the advice: "Avoid when possible the pronoun he, him and his in reference to the hypothetical person . . . ." In a similar vein, the *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* has adopted an "editorial policy" as a "step toward the elimination of linguistic sexism": "Avoid the generic use of the word man. . . . Avoid referring to God with masculine pronouns. . . . Avoid other male-dominated phrases. . . ."[2]

The interest in language and the belief that the problem can be overcome through new linguistic forms did not appear in the previous literature about woman. And that was not for lack of intellectual sophistication. Simone de Beauvoir did not seem to find any problem in this area when she wrote *The Second Sex*.[3] Yvonne Pellé-Douël, in *Etre femme*, clearly indicated why this could not be a problem. Discussing woman as myth, she showed that woman had to be "demythified" in

---

[1] Letty M. Russell, *Human Liberation in a Feminist Perspective: A Theology* (Philadelphia, 1974) pp. 93–94.

[2] The McGraw-Hill guidelines were featured in many newspapers; for the *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, see Vol. 11/2, Spring 1974.

[3] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York, 1953).

order to accede to the level of true symbolism; and language, because it is necessarily used at the two levels of myth and of symbol, is always ambiguous: "All language is ambiguous; it is an insufficient sign of concrete fulness."[4] In these conditions language must be interpreted and reinterpreted. But the attempt to create a nonambiguous language in which woman, man (*vir*), and generic man (*homo*) will always see themselves at their right place so that no interpretation will be needed derives from a naive conception of the symbolization process which is embodied in language.

The linguistic problem points to a deeper anthropological question. What do we mean by "man"? Under what conditions, in what circumstances, do we conceive "mankind" to include both men (*viri*) and women? To say that "man" is a generic term implies a certain attitude toward men and women. But to what reality does the generic paradigm "man" correspond? Human experience has to do with concrete men and with concrete women, never with men in general. The level of meaning at which generic man can be understood is abstract. And while there is nothing wrong with abstraction, the whole trend of modern education makes it less and less likely that abstractions are understood by the majority of people in the unreflexive moments which occupy the greatest part of their days. Thus the generic sense of terms such as "man" and "mankind" becomes what Letty Russell calls "generic nonsense": "It is generic nonsense to say that women are included linguistically when they are excluded by so many practices."[5] Superficial attempts to avoid the anthropological problem are made, as when "chairman" becomes "chairperson." A more sophisticated program looks for the root of the problem, and finds it in "patriarchy." Thus Mary Daly:

The method of liberation involves a *castrating* of language and images that reflect and perpetuate the structure of a sexist world. It castrates precisely in the sense of cutting away the phallocentric value system imposed by patriarchy, in its subtle as well as in its more manifest expressions. As aliens in a man's world who are now rising to name—that is, to create—our own world, women are beginning to recognize that the value system that has been thrust upon us by the various cultural institutions of patriarchy has amounted to a kind of gang rape of minds as well as of bodies.[6]

The notions of patriarchy and of matriarchy, which have been introduced into the discussions, are deeply ambiguous. In Jungian analysis the term "matriarchal" denotes an archetype, related to *anima*,

[4] Yvonne Pellé-Douël, *Etre femme* (Paris, 1967) p. 202.
[5] *Op. cit.*, p. 95.
[6] Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Woman Liberation* (Boston, 1973) p. 9.

the Feminine archetype, which itself corresponds to the dark depths of the soul. It is counterbalanced in all human persons by the patriarchal archetype, related to *animus*, the Masculine archetype, which corresponds to the clear intellectual consciousness. This is by no means identical to a woman-man or female-male dichotomy.[7]

In ethnology matriarchy is used to designate a system of societal relationships *in time*, matrilinear filiation, in which legal ascendency is traced through the mother, the male who has responsibility for the child being usually not the father but a sibling of the mother. In patriarchy, or patrilinear filiation, legal ascendency goes through the father. But ethnological matriarchy does not imply that it is woman who holds power in the societal relationships *in space*.[8] It is therefore sheer fancy to blame patriarchy for sexist language, and still more to imagine, with Elizabeth Gould Davis, that matriarchy was, long ago, a prehistorical golden age.[9]

Thus a myth is being built around nonexistent institutions, the matriarchy and the patriarchy of the current feminist literature. Among the institutions attributed to this patriarchy there is, of course, the Church. Thus a theological problem is raised: Christian theology is accused of speaking a patriarchal, or male-chauvinist, language. This is Mary Daly's summary of the situation: "The entire conceptual systems of theology and ethics, developed under the conditions of patriarchy, have been the product of males and tend to serve the interest of sexist society."[10] The practice of designating God with masculine pronouns, the New Testament denomination of God as "Father," the Lord's Prayer, the Trinitarian designation of the Second Person as "the Son," convey the impression that masculinity is a better symbol for God than femininity. Masculine theological language is therefore attributed to a patriarchal ideology. Because theology has always (or most often) been done by males, God is given male attributes. Thus Christian theology would be *de facto* antifeminist. Although such an interpretation of the classical language about God is far from self-evident, it has been taken seriously enough for several ways of reform to be proposed. Should we, following Mary Daly, "castrate 'God'" and cut away "the Supreme Phallus"?[11] More modestly, should we, with Letty Russell, bring back into use some "forgotten names of God" which the patriarchal society of the Old Testament abandoned because of their implicit suggestion that God has "characteristics frequently thought of as being feminine"?[12] Or should

[7] See Erich Neumann, *The Great Mother* (Princeton, 1972); Ann Belford Ulanov, *The Feminine in Jungian Psychology and Christian Theology* (Evanston, 1971).

[8] See Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Les structures élémentaires de la parenté* (Paris, 1949).

[9] Elizabeth Gould Davis, *The First Sex* (Baltimore, 1971).

[10] *Op. cit.*, p. 4.

[11] *Ibid.*, p. 19.

[12] *Op. cit.*, p. 100.

we endeavor to see femininity in God, especially in connection with the Holy Spirit, in keeping with Leonard Swidler's analysis of *pneuma?*[13]

Here again the new feminism differs from the old. But if the older feminism did not denounce theological language, it may be that the "patriarchal" interpretation of it is not so obvious as one claims it to be. If Simone de Beauvoir was not a theologian, she was at least very well informed and highly articulate. Yet her interpretation of the facts, in *The Second Sex*, was quite different. She saw Christian women, especially the women mystics, as responsible for the masculinity of the divine image: "Woman seeks in divine love what the *amoureuse* seeks in that of man: the exaltation of her narcissism." This explains that mysticism comes, as it were, more naturally to woman than to the male: "It is in the shape of the spouse that God is wont to appear to woman."[14] Can the theological problem be reduced to male chauvinism? Even if it cannot be reduced to female narcissism, it would appear to be more complicated than is being suggested in much of the feminist literature. Part of the complication is that this is not a purely speculative or historical problem that could be handled with the classical tools of theological analysis. The problem touches on nontheological factors. The critics of sexist language in theology tend to focus on anthropological, sociological, and psychological components of the context of theology and religion, even though they treat anthropology, sociology, and psychology with little scientific accuracy. By and large they ignore the less-known and more abstruse discipline of linguistics, thus further weakening a case which a superficial acquaintance with other human sciences wrongly deems to be very strong.

In order to arrive at an informed judgment on the problem of sexist language in theology, I will examine first some aspects of the linguistic question. This will lead me next to some problems relating directly to the language of theology. But perhaps I ought to say here that in my view the linguistic discussion is already theological, since theology, whether it is spoken or written, is couched in human discourse, which itself depends on the fundamental structure of language.[15]

ASPECTS OF THE LINGUISTIC QUESTION

Is Language an Ideology?

The first problem concerns the assumption, made in the contemporary literature about woman and implied in the very expression "sexist

---

[13] Leonard Swidler, "God the Father: Masculine; God the Son: Masculine; God the Holy Spirit: Feminine," *National Catholic Reporter*, Jan. 31, 1975, pp. 7 and 14.

[14] *Op. cit.* (Bantam ed., 1964) pp. 634, 636.

[15] On a linguistic approach to theology, see my *La théologie parmi les sciences humaines* (Paris, 1975).

language," that language in general, or at least the English language as it is now spoken, translates a social situation in which women are dominated by males, the relationships of power being expressed in particular by the prevalence of the male gender ("he," "his," "him") and of male terms ("man," "mankind") in discourses that refer to God and to the human race in general. Letty Russell writes: "However much a particular person or organization may protest that the words *really mean* human, human beings, his and hers, humankind, peoplehood, etc., the fact remains that women are frequently left out of both the mental structures and the social structures of our cultures."[16] In other words, there would be a direct correlation between the structures of male-dominated society and the structures of language: these too are male-dominated.

Clearly, such a thesis could be accepted only as a particular case of a broader thesis. Not only women have been dominated in society: so have slaves, minority groups, minority races, underdeveloped tribes, the proletariat, "natives" in colonial countries, the uneducated everywhere. The thesis about sexist language is acceptable, from a linguistic point of view, only if one accepts the broader thesis that there is a necessary correlation between the structures of society and those of language. The broader thesis, however, is in fact not accepted in linguistics.

The problem amounts to whether or not language is an ideology in the Marxist sense of the term. That it is one was the theory of the Soviet linguist Nicolay Jakovlevitch Marr (1864-1934). Marrism, as it is called in textbooks of linguistics, dominated Soviet schools and research until it was challenged by a *Pravda* article on May 9, 1950, which was signed by a certain Arnold Tchikobava.[17] The central tenet of Marrism was that the Marxist dialectical law applies to the formation of languages as well as to other societal institutions: these reflect the power structure of society, which is embodied primarily in the ownership and management of the means of production. The evolution of languages corresponds to and derives from the evolution of the power structure of society. All languages, like all societies, will eventually undergo the same types of changes in keeping with the inner dynamics of the evolution of economic production. Each type of society initiates one type of language, so that each moment of a language's history is a faithful copy of the historical state of the society where it is spoken. It follows—and Marr himself drew the conclusion—that the languages and dialects actually spoken by proletarians throughout the world have certain common features of

[16] *Op. cit.*, p. 94.
[17] On Marrism see John Murra *et al.*, *The Soviet Linguistics Controversy* (New York, 1951); Lucien Laurat, *Staline, la linguistique et l'impérialisme russe* (Paris, 1951).

structural kinship, although they are not mutually understandable. It would also follow—though Marr did not draw this conclusion—that the languages of male-dominated women throughout the world, in whatever society they live, have certain common features which somehow make them languages of one sisterhood, in which feelings of oppression, resentment, and aspiration to freedom are reflected. It would follow that such sisterhood features could be detected by an acute observer freed from the influence of the male-imposed general structure of these languages, and also that it is possible to change one's language in keeping with the desires and images which reflect our position in society. In the words of Letty Russell, "The way people use language reflects the images in their lives and the patterns of their social behavior. As social patterns and images in church and society change, this may have an effect on our language so that it becomes more inclusive of those who find themselves 'left out.'"[18] This is a watered-down version of Marrism.

Unfortunately for the question of the sexist language, fervor does not replace competence when we deal with such a highly technical science as linguistics. Marrism was never accepted by non-Marxist linguists. And it did not last long within the Soviet Union. There is no need for me to analyze Joseph Stalin's refutation of Marrism in his *Pravda* article of June 20, 1950, "Marxism in Linguistics."[19] Suffice it to quote Bertil Malmberg's remark: "Marrism is completely abandoned today; it denied the most self-evident facts."[20] This is, of course, not to suggest that there are no relations between language and society. But these relations should be carefully studied for each language and in each society. They do not obey any general law concerning who dominates whom.

The debacle of Marrism undercuts the central idea behind the contemporary complaints about sexist language: it forbids us to believe that the use of "he," "his," "him," "man," "mankind," and similar generic terms is due to male domination in society and to a supposed male order in the formation and use of the semantic structures of English.

A countertest may be attempted. If language was an ideology, and sexist language in particular was the ideology of male power, one should expect to find a fairly stable correlation between degrees of feminine subservience in society and degrees of sexism in language. Yet the facts do not warrant such an expectation. Anyone who has consulted a Turkish

---

[18] *Op. cit.*, pp. 94–95.

[19] Joseph Stalin, *Marxism and Linguistics* (New York, 1951). Long before the *Pravda* debate, eminent linguists who were also Marxists had refuted Marr's theory, e.g., Aurélien Sauvageot, *La théorie japhétique de l'académicien Marr*, in the symposium *A la lumière du Marxisme* (Paris, 1935).

[20] Bertil Malmberg, *Les nouvelles tendances de la linguistique* (Paris, 1968) p. 37.

grammar knows that the Turkish language makes no distinction corresponding to "he," "she," "it": there is only one gender for everything and everybody. But anyone who studies the status of woman in traditional Turkish society knows that the Turkish way of life was not exactly liberal as far as women were concerned. And, far from corresponding to an evolution of the language, the revolution initiated by Kemal Ataturk was inspired by imitation of Western countries whose language is notoriously more "sexist" than Turkish.

Sex and Gender

From a more strictly linguistic point of view, one should ask: What is gender? Does gender, in the languages that have several genders, mean, imply, correspond to, suggest sex? On this point the peculiarities of the English language have beclouded the issue. For if "he" and "she" usually correspond to male and female in English and American usage (though more so in the American branch of English: in England, cats and ships are frequently "she"), this is due to a process of neutralization of everything that is not male or female ("it") and not to a primordial sexual status for "he" or "she." Gender does not mean sex, as anyone knows who speaks French, German, Italian, Spanish, or most languages of the world. It is a means of classifying nouns and of explaining the concordance between nouns and adjectives of certain categories. If it denoted or connoted sex, a French male could not be called *une personne*, the mystery of the Triune God could not be called the mystery of *la Trinité*, Madame Veil, the current Minister of Health in the French government, could not be addressed as *Madame le Ministre*, and a most peculiar transformation would take place in the organ of a French church when it passes from the singular (*il*) to the plural (*elles*). That gender is simply a taxonomic denomination that is unrelated to sex appears clearly from the fact that Swahili distinguishes among six different genders, none of which corresponds to male or female. And the Bantu languages of Southern Africa, which count as many as sixteen genders, do not suggest that Bantu culture is acquainted with sixteen sexes. Admittedly, the distinction between genders, whether these are two or sixteen, does correspond to the perception of some distinctions in nature. Thus, in Swahili, "most nouns denoting human beings fall into class I, words denoting inanimate objects into class II, names of trees, plants, etc., into class III, abstract nouns into class VI, and so on. There are many words whose classification appears arbitrary or anomalous, but this does not invalidate the statement that there is a considerable degree of correspondence between gender and a classification of nouns from a semantic point of view."[21] That in most languages male and female fall

---

[21] John Lyons, *Introduction to Theoretical Linguistics* (Cambridge, 1971) p. 286.

into different genders simply means that human beings have noticed a difference between male and female, and that most of them have found this difference important enough to call for grammatical classification.

The misunderstanding by which gender is, in much current discussion and, I suppose, in the popular mind of English-speaking people, assimilated to sex has a well-documented origin. Early Greek grammarians designated the first two genders with terms borrowed from the biological categories which Greek usage included within these genders, that is, male and female, whence masculine and feminine. The third gender, nameless in the first grammars, was called "intermediate" by Aristotle—which obviously suggests that Aristotle did not mistake gender for sex. Later grammatical practice called it "neither" masculine nor feminine, which was translated into Latin as *neuter*. The restriction of two genders to male and female in the English language, and the pooling of everything that is not male and female into the third gender, are responsible for the widespread but erroneous belief that gender means sex, that there are only two genders, and that the third is a misnomer for the nonsexual in nature and culture. The following passage from the *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* statement on "linguistic sexism" is a good example of such an error:

Upon reflection it should also be clear that the feminine-masculine imagery used in the Jewish, Christian, Muslim, and other traditions (i.e. to refer to God and to "entities such as the Church or Israel") is an attempt to express that inferior-superior, human-divine relationship in language that reflected the then, and, often, still existing inferior-superior, female-male societal relationship.[22]

The passage from feminine-masculine to female-male in this text is precisely what no linguistic correlation supports. Already in 1952 Claude Lévi-Strauss warned against hasty assimilations of linguistic patterns to observable empirical phenomena. Social attitudes, he wrote, "do not belong to the same level as linguistic structures, but to a different, more superficial, level."[23] It is precisely because they are superficial that they can be reformed. Sexist discrimination is an observable empirical phenomenon, a social attitude. But language pertains to deeper levels.

The misadventure of gender in English has a curious sequel. It is frequent to hear babies designated as "it" rather than "he" or "she." Gender being popularly assimilated to sex, it would seem natural that those whose sex is—in popular imagination if not in Freudian analysis— more potential than actual should not be "he" or "she" but "it." The inability of the Supreme Court to determine if and when a fetus becomes a person provides a dramatic illustration of the tendency to assimilate

[22] *Journal of Ecumenical Studies, loc. cit.*
[23] Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Anthropologie structurale* (Paris, 1958) p. 82.

personhood and developed sexual characteristics. This assimilation entails a dichotomy between the fully sexual beings and the younger developing beings whose sex, though already biologically determined and psychologically active, is not yet socially affirmed. Women are "she"; baby girls are reduced to "it"; and fetuses are no-thing. Here again Lévi-Strauss's remarks are relevant. Noting that on the one hand the Oneida language spoken among the Iroquois has different pronouns for adult women and for younger girls, and that on the other hand the Iroquois nation extended to women the widest range of rights, he suggested that there could be an inverse correlation between the social status of the adult woman and the linguistic status of the younger girl. While the adult woman is powerful, the younger girl is reduced to the status "of animals and not of human persons." He saw this correlation between "already formalized homogeneous expressions of the linguistic structure and the social structure," rather than between "language and behavior."[24] Is a similar correlation developing in the wake of the woman-liberation movement? The abortionist literature provides many an example of this phenomenon, the latest episode in the Anglo-Saxon misadventure of grammatical gender.

Generic Terms

The problem of generic terms is different from that of pronouns. "Man" in English means both human being and human male, with the result that women are not always quite sure when they are included in man-talk, and that some have come to suspect that they may never be included at all. "As women questioned the generic use of male words they were promptly put down repeatedly with ridicule," Nelle Morton complains. But she adds with some satisfaction: "Finally it became quite evident to them that male and not the generic in the male terminology was meant."[25] This is, of course, a nonscientific statement; for one should first determine if we are faced with the generic use of male terms (we use the male term "man" in the absence of a properly generic term) or with the specific use of a generic term (we use the generic term "man" because we have no other word when we want to speak of the human male as a person rather than a male). In the French language it is clearly the generic term *homme* which is used for the male. German (*Mensch, Mann*) or Swedish (*människa, man*), like Hebrew (*adam, ish*), Greek (*anthrōpos, anēr*), Latin (*homo, vir*), and many other languages use two words. In German, too, the generic *Mensch*, in the parlance of some parts

---

[24] *Ibid.*

[25] Quoted in Russell, *op. cit.*, p. 94.

of Southern Germany, is, in the neuter gender, used for woman.[26] Thus the linguistic problem is infinitely more complex than we may be led to believe. Why the Old English term *manncynn* (related to German *Mensch* and Swedish *människa*) disappeared from the language and left us without a generic term is anybody's guess. In any case, it is evident, from a look at Hebrew, Greek, Roman, or Germanic civilizations, that the use of two terms does not mitigate the male domination of society.

Linguistically, "man" can be treated as an ambivalent or equivocal word, a word with two meanings, the sense being determined in each case according to the rest of the discourse (the context). Or "man" (human being) and "man" (human male) can also be treated as homonyms. In either case, the problem of discriminating between two possible meanings is to be solved in the syntagmatic dimension of language. That is, one should ask: How does the word function in relation to the other parts of the discourse in which it appears? The various recent guidelines against linguistic sexism erroneously place the problem in the paradigmatic dimension: they suggest replacing the word by others, such as persons, human beings, members of the human race, they, etc. This is a shortsighted project which may lift an occasional ambiguity but leaves two basic problems untouched. First, the living meaning of terms (their denotation and connotations) emerges as they are featured in the syntagmatic order. This follows the structure of each language and cannot be tampered with without creating further ambiguities. Second, whether we select our paradigms (words) or we order them syntactically, we may always be playing a game which is not detectable at the surface of our discourse.

Language Games

In order to locate sexist language or linguistic sexism properly, we must leave the strict compound of linguistic science and enter the vaguer area of linguistic philosophy.

As I hope I have sufficiently indicated, the common mistake of the usual argumentation against sexist language is that it tries to cope with the level of what Ferdinand de Saussure, the initiator of structural linguistics, called *la langue*. Facing the constitutive structure of language, it sees evil in the inadequacy of certain paradigms, taken in their denotation as accepted in the society speaking the language in question, to express the contemporary shift of power in the male-female dialectic. By the same token, it is led to assume, gratuitously and erroneously, that

---

[26] According to Sachs-Villatte, *Dictionnaire encyclopédique français-allemand et allemand-français* (4th ed.; Berlin, 1917) art. *Mensch*.

the present paradigms of our language express a past power relationship in which males dominated females. This is linguistically naive and historically simplistic. But the picture changes considerably if we look at the other face of language, called by de Saussure *la parole*.[27] There is no English equivalent for the distinction between *langue* and *parole*, but we approximate the scope of the distinction if we see language as a system generally available for communication (*langue*) and as effectively used for communication by individuals (*parole*). Then the question is no longer one of language structure. It turns into the phenomenological question: What do I do when I speak? What do I do when I say, for instance, "Man is made in the image of God"? Whom do I include in this term "man"?

In the *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* Ludwig Wittgenstein wrote: "A proposition is the description of a state of things."[28] The later Wittgenstein judged rather that (in my words) a proposition is the description of a state of mind. The meaning of language, taken not as a theoretical possibility of communication but as actually communicating information from one person to others, is not to be discovered by an objective analysis of the rules of semantics and syntax at work in a discourse, but by investigation of the explicit or implicit, conscious or unconscious intention of the speaker. From this perspective language reveals, besides the generally accepted meaning of the terms used as interpreted in keeping with generally accepted grammatical rules, the state of mind of the speaker. Wittgenstein encapsulated this insight in the notion of "language games." One and the same proposition can be used according to several games. While the game comparison suggested by de Saussure when he compared the rules of grammar to those of chess[29] illustrated the objective structure of *la langue*, the game comparison of Wittgenstein intended to throw light on the subjective twist of *la parole*.

My contention is precisely that the question of sexist language must be asked and answered at the level of language games. If I wish to know what I really put under such terms as "he," "him," "his," "man," "mankind," etc., I should go way beyond, or deep within, what is revealed about words and their usage by the structure of the language I speak. I should attempt to discover what I would understand by what I say if I were not a somewhat sophisticated theologian, philosopher, linguist, engineer, author, or what not, but a child who is still unaware of the objective or generally accepted meanings and rules of this language. Thus a language game, for Wittgenstein, is not a play with words; it is a

---

[27] Ferdinand de Saussure, *Cours de linguistique générale* (Paris, 1971) pp. 36–39.

[28] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* (London, 1961) no. 4.024.

[29] *Op. cit.*, pp. 124–27.

very serious enterprise of psychological and philosophical investigation. The description of language games contained in *The Blue Book* is quite significant:

I shall in the future again and again draw your attention to what I shall call language games. These are ways of using signs simpler than those in which we use the signs of our highly complicated everyday language. Language games are the forms of language with which a child begins to make use of words. The study of language games is the study of primitive forms of language or primitive languages. If we want to study the problems of truth and falsehood, of the agreement and disagreement of propositions with reality, of the nature of assertion, assumption, and question, we shall with great advantage look at primitive forms of language in which these forms of thinking appear without the confusing background of highly complicated processes of thought. When we look at such simple forms of language the mental mist which seems to enshroud our ordinary use of language disappears. We see activities, reactions, which are clear-cut and transparent. On the other hand we recognize in these simple processes forms of language not separated by a break from our more complicated ones. We see that we can build up the complicated forms from the primitive ones by gradually adding new forms.[30]

This quotation will help us to pinpoint the true problem of sexist language. It is twofold. On the one hand, what do I, as this concrete person, really, honestly, intend to convey by such terms as are questioned in the controversy about sexist language? What does the "primitive man" in me truly mean? What image of the world, of society, of male and female, presides over my use of words? On the other hand, what do I, as this concrete person, hear when I receive a discourse in my understanding? What do I read into other people's discourses under the influence of my "primitive" or "childish" or simply favorite view of the world, of society, of male and female?

The same point may be clarified with the categories of J. L. Austin or Donald Evans.[31] When it is spoken, language not only conveys information, it also orients the speaker in the direction of a certain type of action. It is "performative." It expresses the speaker's wish to influence the world in a certain way. It reveals an attitude. It inspires a behavior. So the question of sexist language becomes: What is the underlying attitude of my use of "he," "him," "his," "man," "mankind," etc.? How do I wish to influence power struggles between male and female? Similar questions should be asked about the underlying intentions of my use of such terms as black, race, poor, proletarian, liberation, revolution, and of all that

---

[30] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books* (New York, 1965) p. 17.

[31] J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Cambridge, Mass., 1962); Donald Evans, *The Language of Self-Involvement* (London, 1963).

connotes relationships between individuals or groups with unequal or diverse standings in the implicit value-systems of society.

The answers to such questions may indeed reveal an astonishing amount of sexual bias in the language of most people. Many readers who have never seen themselves as male (or female) chauvinists would well be astonished if they analyzed their language games and discerned the implicit direction of their self-involvement in language referring to male and female. By the same token, the solution to the ensuing dilemmas cannot be a linguistic solution, because the dilemma itself is not linguistic. Were I a Turk, I could still play a sexist game with a language which does not express the distinction between "he" and "she": my bias could affect the tone of my voice, my smile, the twinkle in my eye, the gesture I make, the many nonlinguistic signs which accompany my speech. Were I a Swahili-speaking East African, I could likewise express my involvement in a world where males dominate females, even though the six gender categories of my language do not correspond to a feminine-masculine distinction, still less to a female-male opposition.

Similar remarks should also be made concerning myself as receiver of spoken communication; for I am likely to understand others according to my inner bias. The scholastic axiom *Quidquid recipitur ad modum recipientis recipitur* already pointed to a major aspect of human communication: Do I, in the interior game I play when I hear the speech of others, project my sexist bias into discourses that may well be perfectly innocent of linguistic sexism? This question is, of course, relevant to our present concerns. I suspect that much denunciation of sexist language in others reveals the bias of the hearer rather than that of the speakers.

Is There a Solution?

If my analysis is correct, then the problem is much more complicated than appears, and it cannot possibly be solved by superficially adjusting our choice of words to a new fashion and by pressuring authors into new vocabulary habits. At most, this will do what tokenism did to the black movement: blunt the edge of the struggle. Solutions at the level of words can only be illusory. Nietzsche's *Zarathustra* perceived this:

Oh my beasts, said Zarathustra, keep on chattering and let me listen. Your chattering refreshes me—where there is chattering, the world lies before me like a garden. How lovely it is that words and sounds exist. Are words and sounds not rainbows and illusion-bridges between what is forever divided?
Each soul has a different world. For each soul, every other soul is a hinterland.
Between two objects most similar, illusion carries the loveliest lies, for the smallest gap is the hardest to bridge. . . .

How lovely is all speaking and all lying of sounds! With sounds, our love can dance on many-colored rainbows.[32]

Which I take to mean: language reforms provide illusory solutions to human problems; for the problems pertain to a deeper metalinguistic symbolic level. They arise in the semiotic dimension of life. They belong to the meaning and reading of symbols. This insight enriched Yvonne Pellé-Douël's contribution to a philosophy of womanhood: to be a woman is to assume a certain symbolism within the fundamental human vocation.

Woman has an experimental knowledge of her feminine being, of her femininity. There are strictly feminine ways of living out the human vocation: this is an irrefutable truth. There are feminine ways of being a human being, experiences which pertain only to women as these exist in the human community, in union with a man, in society, in the divine-human relationship. There is a feminine 'existentiality.'[33]

Each woman has to discover, to endorse, to enrich, to live her own symbolic function and value among the many aspects of the feminine condition in nature and culture. In so doing, she serves both herself and humankind; for "the feminine values belong to the whole of humanity, and finally their sense is one integral sense; there are no feminine values; there are human values carried, manifested, symbolized by women."[34] To assume a symbolic vocation does not amount to being given meaning by others, by men, by the males who have hitherto presided over the organization of society and led the development of culture. Rather, one should interpret the human condition in such a way that meaning is created and becomes manifest in one's life. The challenge is to assume in intention, thought, feeling, project, and action what constitutes the purpose of language: to communicate values. Words are given values that are read as their meaning. Human persons choose their own meaning, as useful or purposeless, real or illusory, good or evil, other-centered or self-centered, Godward or self-enclosed, serving or dominating. And they express this in language.

Thus it is not, after all, surprising that when Lévi-Strauss, analyzing the elementary structures of kinship, found these structures to hinge on the prevalence of exogamic marriage due to the prohibition of incest, he compared woman to the word which speech sends from speaker to listener in order to create ties between individuals, just as the exchange

[32] Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (Chicago, 1957) p. 224.
[33] *Op. cit.*, p. 133.
[34] *Ibid.*, p. 160.

of women in marriage creates ties between clans and tribes.[35] To be human is to take on a semiotic dimension. It is to become language, to create values, to invent meaning, to communicate with others in speech and behavior and with the All-Other in worship, according to our insights into the depths of existence. Whatever the real one-sidedness and the verbal exaggerations of her book *Beyond God the Father*, Mary Daly comes to this conclusion as she writes: "The question itself is the beginning of an answer that keeps unfolding itself. The question-answer is a verb, and when one begins to move in the current of the verb, of the Verb, she knows that she is not a mirror."[36] A mirror reflects. A person invents. Woman is called to be a verb because this is, in imitation of God, the human vocation. She has to discover what verb she is, to create her own verb, to be what her verb means, to do what her verb says. In so doing, she will relate to "the creative drawing power of the Good Who is self-communicating Be-ing, Who is the Verb from whom, in whom, and with whom all true movements move."[37]

So the linguistic reform that is called for by the woman movement should not be satisfied with surface adjustments of our spoken tongues, as though eliminating some words and altering gender patterns could help to gauge the meaning of woman and of man (in the two senses of "man"). The demand should be for a reform in depth of our symbolisms, social, political, cultural, esthetic, and, yes, religious and theological, so that at all levels and in all dimensions women may discover their meaning, conceive their project, fulfil their service, define their expectation, refine their attention, offer their leadership, give their witness, formulate their prayer, share their worship, create their life. According to the Christian faith, there is only one key to such a spiritual renovation: dying and rising with Christ.[38] The theological tradition of St. Cyril of Alexandria preferred to say that the Logos became "man" rather than became "a man"; for the Word assumed all humankind in His dying and rising, women no less than men. To discover oneself in Christ is not a matter of language. It is a matter of what Roland Barthes calls *l'écriture:*[39] the woman who creates her life finds by the same token her own style, both her style of life and her style of communication, her style of symbolization. And, as has been shown by Jacques Derrida, there is a sense in which *l'écriture* is anterior to language.[40]

This, of course, brings us directly to the theological problems.

[35] *Op. cit.,* pp. 67–72.
[36] *Op. cit.,* p. 197; see the explanations given on pp. 33–34.
[37] *Ibid.,* p. 198.
[38] Cf. Pellé-Douël, *op. cit.,* pp. 85–161.
[39] Roland Barthes, *Le degré zéro de l'écriture* (Paris, 1953).
[40] Jacques Derrida, *De la grammatologie* (Paris, 1967).

THEOLOGICAL SEXISM?

The basic question here is simple: What are the language games of theologians? Is there, in what they have been doing since Christians began to reflect about their faith, a sex-discrimination game? Is their language, in some of its aspects, a sexist language? This is not asking if theologians have not occasionally, at times, often, or even most of the time, forgotten to examine what contributions women could bring to theology. It is not asking if they have ever thought of such a possibility. No doubt, theologians have frequently forgotten many things. They could often apply to themselves what Wittgenstein wrote of himself as a philosopher: "I do philosophy now like an old woman who is always mislaying something and having to look for it again: now her spectacles, now her keys."[41] The feminine contribution to theology may well be the mislaid spectacles, the missing keys, that are necessary to a fully human or Christian theology. The question would then be: How does it happen that theologians have never even noticed that these spectacles or these keys were missing? Have they been, unawares, both the actors and the victims of a primitive misogynist language game?

This is the contention of many today. Thus Joan Morris contends that ecclesiastics and church historians have systematically hidden the true history of woman in the Church, especially as regards the existence of women with a quasi-episcopal authority.[42] Thus Clara M. Henning affirms: "The operative law of the Church is designed to grant men— specifically priests—the absolute controlling position."[43] Thus Mary Daly states: the "denial of rationality in women by Christian theologians has been a basic tactic for confining them to the condition of moral imbecility."[44]

Many remarks could, of course, be made about each of these points. For instance, the existence of abbesses exempted from the jurisdiction of bishops and holding jurisdiction over priests has always been well known to historians. Or also: if canon law has had the effect of putting some men in controlling positions, it is both historically and logically absurd to conceive of the entire system of law as being designed to have this effect. Or yet: the tactic detected by Mary Daly must have been a notorious failure, given the great number of canonized women saints, who cannot be called moral imbeciles by any stretch of imagination.

These samples of rash escalation in the assault on theological sexism

[41] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty* (New York, 1972) no. 532.

[42] Joan Morris, *The Lady Was a Bishop* (New York, 1973). This title is, of course, entirely misleading; the lady was never a bishop.

[43] Clara M. Henning, *Canon Law and the Battle of the Sexes*, in Rosemary Radford Ruether, ed., *Religion and Sexism* (New York, 1974) p. 286.

[44] *Op. cit.*, p. 101.

should not blind us to the genuine problem, which strikes at the heart of theology: Has Christian theology borrowed from the human male the experiential model for its description of God? Have our images of God and, by extension, our views of the mysteries of the Incarnation, the redemption, the life of grace, the sacraments, the Church, been distorted by misogynism?

Is God a Father?

It is a telling commentary on the present deliquescence of theological awareness that the process of analogical thinking as used in the God-talk of the great Christian tradition is regularly ignored or misunderstood when it comes to such questions as: Why do we refer to God as He, not as She? Why do we speak of God as our Father, of God the Father, of God the Son? Why not our Mother, God the Mother, God the Daughter? Such questions are asked at the level of images and metaphors, sometimes at that of analogy of attribution. And they assume that human discourse can be changed at will, and that anyone can invent a new metaphysics.

But can one create symbols? If our basic images are archetypal residues of millennia of human experience (as Carl Jung would see them) or translations of ontological structures inexorably enscribed in human psyche and human chemistry (as Lévi-Strauss might say) or natural precomprehensions of the divine self-revelation in Christ (as I would like to suggest), then the questions ought to be asked and answered at greater depth. Does the Christian language about "the Father, from whom every patrimony in heaven and on earth takes its name" (Eph 3:15), derive from an ontic level which should be accepted because it is first given to us, and ought to be understood because rationality seeks for understanding, but that can be tampered with only at the cost of a denial of nature and an impoverishment of culture? The superficial question remains at the level of what Yvonne Pellé-Douël calls myth;[45] the deeper question operates at the level of what she calls symbol.[46]

The answer of classical theology was given in terms of analogy. Divine Fatherhood, whether intra-Trinitarian or *ad extra*, is an analogy, a special kind of symbolization that allows us to speak of the unspeakable. But the only analogy that may be validly applied to a totally transcendental subject (and God is, of course, the only totally transcendental subject) is the analogy of proper proportionality. This does not posit anything common between the terms that are being compared, since these are strictly heterogeneous to each other. God is beyond all genus.

[45] *Op. cit.*, p. 165–95.
[46] *Ibid.*, pp. 197–226.

Nothing that is connoted by fatherhood in human experience applies to Him, which is the exact reason why the New Testament, in the Lord's Prayer, qualifies fatherhood with "heavenhood." What is true of fatherhood on earth cannot be predicated of heavenly fatherhood. God our Father in the "economic" Trinity, God the Father in the "transcendent" Trinity, are always meant of "God in heaven." As a result, to speak of fatherhood in God is to negate human fatherhood as a proper image of God. Likewise, to speak of a motherhood of God—an expression which is not unheard of in classical authors, both mystics and theologians—is to negate human motherhood as a proper image of God. All that is said by this type of language is this: in our human experience of fatherhood, of motherhood, especially when lived and understood in the light of the Christian revelation, there is trace of an element that places us on the right direction to relate to God and to understand this relationship.

Analogical nomination of God is both negative and positive. It is negative since it negates that human fathers are images of God in their fatherhood; it is positive since it affirms that the human experience of fatherhood—at its best, not in the sorry instances of too many individuals—helps us to understand our relationship to God and therefore God as the originating and dominant term of this relationship. It is negative insofar as it denies that fathering a child images the divine Fatherhood; it is positive insofar as it affirms that relating to a father helps me to understand my relation to God. The human term of the fatherhood analogy is not human fatherhood as lived by human fathers; it is the experience of human persons, women as well as men, of relating to a human father in love, gratitude, and obedience. The point of comparison for the divine Fatherhood is not human fatherhood: this would imply a point-by-point comparison, which proper proportionality denies radically. It is human filiation. This implies a proportion, that is, a correspondence of relationships, which requires four terms. God's Fatherhood *ad extra* is a short expression implying: *filiation* and *parenthood* in humankind; *human creature* and *God the Creator*. Intra-Trinitarian Fatherhood is also an epitome of the Christian revelation concerning the inner life of God: *filiation* and *parenthood* in mankind; the *Second* and the *First Person* in God. That is, my experience of human filiation helps me to understand Jesus' relationship to his divine Father, which I believe further to express the eternal relationship between the divine Word and the fontal Principle of the Divinity.

The relevance of this for our discussion is, I believe, that the sexist game has not been played by the theologians who have commented on the divine Fatherhood or by the authors of the New Testament who

evoked for us Jesus' filial love for the Father, or by Jesus himself, if indeed it is correct that the appellation *Abba* in the New Testament goes back to the historical Jesus of Nazareth. The sexist game was not played by a writer like Julian of Norwich, who spoke of "God, All-Wisdom, our kindly Mother" and of "our Mother Christ": she took her point of departure in her experience of being daughter to a human mother, and she found this meaningful for her understanding of her relationship to the Word Incarnate as Jesus.[47]

If I may call this the primary level of theology, the sexist game has been played, I suspect, at the secondary level, not by metaphysicians who have carefully purified their concepts with the tools of analogical thinking, but by theological popularizers and by pastors, bishops, and priests whose preaching has shaped the popular theological language and the popular Christian mind. The advent of the scientific age has developed an empirical mentality which makes it all but impossible for most of us to think analogically in the classical sense of this term. Then analogy of proper proportionality is replaced by other types of comparison. The working concepts of God and of divine Fatherhood, far from being united in the *via negationis* which underlies classical analogy, operate along divergent lines of uncritical *affirmatio*. They waver between literalism, which takes fatherhood in man as a positive image of fatherhood in God, and liberalism, for which human appellations of God are pure metaphors. The process of popularization, which seems indispensable to the preaching of the gospel to the masses, has banalized our images of God. And, at least in regard to God as the Father, banalization is falsification. At this level the protest against the Fatherhood of God is entirely justified. One must reach "beyond god the father" in order to remain faithful to the revelation of the transcendence of God. In attempting to give life to its images and to make the gospel relevant, secondary-level theology has no doubt played language games which have aped the power games and the sexist games of society.

I tend to think, however (but I may well be wrong, and such a surmise is difficult to document), that the mind of the People of God has not been greatly misled by popular preaching and teaching and writing. At least, the Catholic concept of the *sensus fidelium* implies that the Spirit also protects and guides the faith of the people. The faith may well be right even when the theology is wrong. I doubt that most Christians think of God's Fatherhood in the terms rightly denounced by the Koran: "The Creator of the heavens and the earth—how should He have a son, seeing that He has no consort, and He created all things, and He has knowledge of everything?"[48]

[47] Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love* (Westminster, Md., 1952) p. 119. See *Woman in Christian Tradition* (Notre Dame, 1973) pp. 144–45.

[48] *Cattle*, in A. J. Arberry, tr., *The Koran Interpreted* 1 (New York, n.d.) 161.

Should the Spirit be Feminine?

I probably would not speak to this topic but for an unfortunate essay by Leonard Swidler.[49] The suggestion is made in this article that we may call the Father and the Son "Him," but the Spirit should be called "She." The idea runs into several major difficulties. First, there are linguistic difficulties. The author argues from his belief that the Greek word for Spirit, *pneuma*, frequently used by St. Paul, is, like the Hebrew term *hochma*, feminine. However, this is a bad mistake, as anyone can see by looking up a dictionary. *Pneuma* is not feminine; it is neuter, neither masculine nor feminine. It belongs to the Greek equivalent of the English gender rendered as "it." The only traditional church languages in which the word for Spirit is feminine are the Semitic languages. Thus, to argue from Greek is a mistake. To argue from Hebrew, Aramaic, or Syriac to throw light on the proper use of gender in English would be another mistake; for gender does not have the same connotations in all languages, as shown by the fact that languages do not use the same genders for the same things. There is a third mistake in that the proposed idea assimilates gender to sex.

There is, of course, no problem about Syriac- or Arabic-speaking Christians referring to the Spirit in the feminine gender, since in their languages this entails no consequence about female symbolism. But to diversify English pronouns in order to stress a supposedly feminine —understood as female—aspect of the Spirit is another matter. The pronouns that designate the three Persons might be diversified—were this linguistically possible—if indeed the pronouns designated the relational oppositions, the relationships between the Father and the Word, the Word and the Father, the Father and the Spirit, the Word and the Spirit, the Spirit and the Word. But when Christians refer to the Father, the Son, and the Spirit—in worship, private prayer, preaching, or teaching—they think of the totality of the Divinity which relates to them and relates them to Itself. When they think of the Divinity in the shape, form, or image of one of the three Persons, it is still the divine substance as the content of the Persons which they have in mind, since the divine Persons have no other content than their common divinity or substance. Theologians occasionally reflect about the relational oppositions, the processions, the singularity of each Person. Mystics occasionally believe that they have received an ineffable experience of the relational oppositions in their wonder, their beauty, their richness; and they may attempt to describe this experience indirectly with the help of esthetic or psychological symbols. But even then, the reality which is aimed at in each Person is always the Divinity, which is identical in all three (as implied in the *homoousia* of the early councils). When we refer

[49] See n. 13 above.

to the works of God *ad extra*, which proceed from the divine power common to the three, we give glory to the three Persons in their total oneness. Accordingly, we may well say "he," "him," "his," or "she," "her," "hers," or "it," "its," about any of the three Persons, always designating the divine *ousia*, since this is the substance (*homoousia*) of each Person. Stretching somewhat the limits of language, we may say that the Divinity, the oneness, is always the noun, whereas the Persons are verbs. We could differentiate between the Persons linguistically with the help of different pronouns only if pronouns did not stand for nouns, if designations did not point to what is, if symbols had no content; for the content of the Persons is and cannot be anything else than the divine *ousia*. Pronouns cannot express the relational oppositions in the life of God. To diversify our pronouns in order to stress the singularity of each Person would be to break the simplicity of the divine Being.

Femininity in God?

Admittedly, there have been previous attempts to introduce some sort of femininity in God. In the *De trinitate* 13, 5–6, St. Augustine discarded the comparison of the three Persons to the three members of a nuclear family: father, wife-mother, child. In my *Woman in Christian Tradition* I drew attention to Julian of Norwich (Christ our Mother), to St. Gregory Palamas (Christ is our "brother ... bridegroom ... father ... mother ... "), to Vladimir Soloviev's visions of the divine Sophia, to Victor White's suggestion that the feminine dimension in God could be explored with the help of Jungian psychology.[50] But this does not constitute a tradition of divine femininity. Both Palamas and Julian spoke in reference to the Incarnation, not to the intradivine life. Soloviev's Sophia is not God; it is the soul of the world as the epiphany of God shining in Christ, in the Church, in the Virgin, and eventually in mankind transformed in the image of the Theanthropy.

Yet it is not out of place to investigate further if there is not a sense in which we may or should conceive of God as somehow feminine. This cannot be, if I am correct in my understanding of the mystery of the Trinity, at the level of the Persons. But could it not be at the level of God's manifestation of Himself *ad extra* in creation and re-creation? That humankind is created in two forms polarly related to each other is hardly an accident of the human nature. The entire animate world is created according to a similar polarity. And the mythologies and cosmogonies of most peoples have seen the whole cosmos made alive by the polarities of the Yin and the Yang—expressed, of course, in manifold cultural forms. The tradition of the Old Testament, or rather a trend within that tradition, used such images to describe the unequal polarity of the

[50] *Woman in Christian Tradition*, pp. 144–45, 158, 160–63, 146 respectively.

covenant. And it may not be purely coincidental that the first inkling of
the covenant shows the Spirit of God (*rouach elohim;* LXX: *pneuma
theou*) "brooding" (*merachepheth;* LXX: *epephereto*) over the waste
(Gn 1:2). Brooding evokes the very feminine image of the mother bird
waiting patiently for her eggs to hatch, or also (the verb can have this
sense) hovering over the nest while she encourages her young ones to get
up and fly. It is precisely in the process of creation that God can be seen
in a "feminine" attitude, an attitude which pervades both the Old and
the New Testament when writers and prophets perceive the fulness of the
divine love for His people. God loves mankind with a motherly love. As
"the power of the Most High" (*dynamis hypsistou*), this primordial love,
in the epiphany of Lk 1:35, "overshadows" (*episkiasei*) the Virgin. Thus
God, as Father, Word, and Spirit, manifests Himself to humankind in a
love which human experience associates with a mother's love. The
Sophia of Vladimir Soloviev was this love. The divine "energies," in
Palamas' conception of the Trinity, are radiations of the divine Glory,
the manifestation of the fulness of divine love.

It would seem normal that, having perceived this love in their response
to it, the Christian faithful would from time to time have imagined God
under the feminine traits of divine Motherhood. The Catholic and the
Orthodox traditions have channeled such images toward the *ecclesia*, the
soul, the Virgin Mary, rather than toward God Himself. For reasons of
Trinitarian theology, they have discouraged the projection of the
male-female polarity into our conception of the divine. But they have left
two ways open for a theological integration of the feminine dimension of
life in our concept and representation of God. There is the way of the
divine Motherhood, manifested in creation and re-creation: Julian of
Norwich explored it without hesitancy. And there is the way, dear to
many mystics and basic to the Catholic theology of the sacrament of
marriage, of an analogy between the gift of love in the transcendent
Trinity and the gift of love between man and woman. As commented
upon before the advent of scientific exegesis, the Song of Songs developed
such an analogy. From Origen through St. Bernard to St. John of the
Cross, this analogy is constantly used to describe the development and
the highest degrees of the spiritual life. The mystery of the bridegroom
and the bride reflects the mystery of God's inner love. We should endorse
Ann Belford Ulanov's summing up of the Catholic conception of love:
"The mystery of the unconditioned Divine, the Father, seeing uncondi-
tional worth in the human, the Son, and bestowing that worth in an act
of self-giving love, the Spirit, is fully reflected in the mystery of
unconditional love between lovers."[51] Moralists would have said "be-
tween husband and wife." But mystics have been bolder.

[51] *Op. cit.*, p. 308.

In the mystery of love between God and His creatures, God is not male and human persons female, nor is God female and human persons male. But the polarity between them is such that in the fulness of love the distinction between the two poles is abolished; for the fulness of divine love erases distinctions, integrating them into organic wholeness. Who is male, who is female, in St. John of the Cross's explanation of this verse of stanza 35 of the *Spiritual Canticle* (shorter version): *Y vamonos a ver en tu hermosura?*

Let us so act that we may be alike in beauty and that thy beauty may be such that, when one of us looks at the other, each may be like to thee in thy beauty, and may see himself in thy beauty, which will be the transforming of me in thy beauty. Thus I shall see thee in thy beauty and thou wilt see me in thy beauty; and thou wilt see thyself in me in thy beauty, and I shall see myself in thee in thy beauty; and thus I may be like to thee in thy beauty, and thou mayest be like to me in thy beauty, and my beauty may be thy beauty and thy beauty my beauty; and I shall be thou in thy beauty, and thou wilt be I in thy beauty, because thy beauty itself will be my beauty.[52]

The polarity of the Yin and the Yang is not a polarization between male and female. Feminine elements may be kept, or introduced, in the thematization of our relationship to God, where this is at all possible. But these elements belong to men as well as to women. They are at work, not only in Julian of Norwich calling Christ "Our Mother," but also in St. Angela di Foligno's spontaneous prayer to God: "My Son, my Son, do not abandon me, my Son."[53]

CONCLUSION

The danger of the woman-liberation movement in the Church is that it can distort polarity into polarization. Drawing on Jungian psychology, Ann Belford Ulanov gives timely warning:

Polarity and polarization can be understood as two ways that pairs of opposites may relate to each other. In polarity, the opposites are related to each other by mutual attraction; they are drawn to unite to each other without destroying the distinct individuality of each pole; on the contrary, the individuality of each is heightened and realized. In polarization, the opposites pull away from each other and conflict with each other. The two poles split apart and destroy the individuality of each other.[54]

Presumably, concern for neat language has not been the only motivation of the questions that are being asked about linguistic sexism in

---

[52] The translation is Allison Peers's (minus his many capital letters), *Works of St. John of the Cross* 2 (Westminster, Md., 1945) 164.

[53] *L'Esperienza di Dio amore: Il libro di Angela di Foligno* (Rome, 1972) p. 137.

[54] *Op. cit.*, p. 296.

theology. The need to provoke conflicts has played its part. One could psychoanalyze this need as the reversed *machismo* of the masculinity complex. This was already done by Marynia Farnham in relation to the early feminist movement: "Psychologically, feminism had a simple objective: the achievement of maleness by the female, or the nearest approach to it."[55] One could also "politico-analyze" it, that is, uncover the political components borrowed from the Hegelian-Marxist theory of conflicts, which one finds in most theologies of liberation. Where Frantz Fanon wrote: "La lutte elle-même, dans son déroulement, dans son processus interne, développe les différentes directions de la culture et en esquisse de nouvelles,"[56] Gustavo Gutierrez says: "el hecho histórico, político, liberadores crecimiento del Reino, es acontecer salvífico...."[57] Elizabeth Gould Davis sees woman liberation as political messianism:

Only the complete and total demolition of the social body will cure the fatal sickness. Only the overthrow of the three-thousand-year-old beast of masculist materialism will save the race.... She who was revered and worshipped by early man because of her power to see the unseen will once again be the pivot—not as sex but as divine woman—about whom the next civilization will, as of old, revolve.[58]

Going further, Mary Daly identifies the discovery of sisterhood with the cause of causes, the final cause of the universe.[59] And Judith Plastow Goldenberg opens a mythifying perspective on the transformation, not only of humankind, but also of God, as a result of the advent of woman. She expects the superwoman to come, the Lilith, created at the beginning, of a Jewish legend. Both God and man fear her return.[60] At this point, of course, we are not in religion, in theology, or in feminine symbolism; we are in pagan mythology.

The suggestions examined in the present essay have been more sober, less mythical and less mystifying. But we should delude ourselves were we to think that questions concerning God as He or She or It, concerning the meaning of the term "man," are easy semantic plays of words that

[55] Marynia Farnham and Ferdinand Lundberg, *Modern Woman, the Lost Sex* (New York, 1947) p. 167.

[56] Frantz Fanon, *Les damnès de la terre* (Paris, 1970) p. 173 ("The struggle itself, in its unfolding, in its interior process, nurtures the diverse directions of culture and sketches out new ones").

[57] Gustavo Gutierrez, *Teología de la liberación* (Lima, 1971) p. 228 ("the historical, political, liberating event *is* increase of the kingdom, *is* salvific happening..."). Admittedly, the author adds: "but it is neither *the* coming of the kingdom nor *the whole* salvation."

[58] *Op. cit.*, pp. 339.

[59] *Op. cit.*, pp. 180–90.

[60] Judith Plastow Goldenberg, *The Coming of Lilith*, in Ruether, *Religion and Sexism*, p. 343.

can be dealt with at the superficial level of how we speak. The hypothesis that the male masters of the Church and of theology have adopted and maintained the sexist language that has prevailed in society since the fading away of a hypothetical matriarchal age reaches deeper levels. It touches on the fundamental structure of language. It touches also on the fundamental structure of theology, since the Church is accused of endorsing a male conception of God by excluding in practice the use of feminine pronouns to speak of the Divinity.

I have shown that this polemic rests largely on a series of misunderstandings: on the nature of language, which is not an ideology; on the nature of linguistic gender, which cannot be equated with sex; on analogical thinking, which cannot be identified with metaphors and comparisons; on Trinitarian theology, which cannot separate the Persons at the level of their essence designated by the pronouns. I have also found the true location of linguistic sexism in the language games that unconsciously have been and are played in society and in the Church. I have indicated that the solution does not lie in superficial reforms of manners of speech, but in a fundamental restructuration of Christian symbols. And I have suggested that both the theological and the mystical traditions contain steppingstones toward this restructuration, which requires an integration of the fulness of human experience, including its feminine dimension, in our relationship to God and in the thematization and formulation of this relationship. But, unlike political revolutions, theological renovations can be done only in serenity. They require, not the conflict of classes, sexes, or theologies, but the working together and, if need be, the reconciliation of all in the sorority-fraternity of the gospel.