

# The Maleness of God

## – A comparison of readings by Anne Carr and Paul Jewett –

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### Introduction

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This brief essay compares and contrasts the views of Paul Jewett and Anne Carr on the application of gendered language to God. The critical review is based on excerpts of Jewett's book *God, Creation, and Revelation* (Jewett 2007) and Carr's article *Feminist Theology* (Carr 2007). These articles consider the preponderance of male imagery in Christian discussion of God, which both consider to be unnecessary. In this essay I summarise the two excerpts and describe the key differences in their approaches.

### Synopsis

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#### Jewett

The article by Jewett starts with a presupposition<sup>1</sup> that theological language is analogical. He accepts that traditional speech about God is regarded by many as sexist and that "women are justified in their complaint that the traditional understanding of our traditional language about God has made them second-class citizens." Since the language accused of being sexist is analogical, however, Jewett proposes that its male bias does not imply that God is male.

In the Incarnation, given the way God has constructed human gender, God had to become either male or female. Nothing in God's character *logically entails* that the Incarnation had to be male. Rather, this is a *natural consequence* of God's revelation within a patriarchal society. To speak of God in feminine terms is not heretical, but we can only consider that possibility hypothetically, since God *in fact* chose to incarnate as a man.

#### Carr

The article by Carr observes that "in spite of theological denials of sexuality ... in God, the persistent use of masculine pronouns for God and the reaction of many Christians against references to God as 'she' would appear to affirm the 'maleness' attributed to God." She believes we should proactively seek "to reorient Christian imagination from the idolatrous implications of exclusively masculine God-language." The article considers alternatives such as "parent" or "God/ess", and notes that it would be better to use a multiplicity of metaphors rather than just one. She shows a preference for the metaphor of "God as friend" because it moves our understanding towards "the feminist ideal of 'communal personhood.'"

### Comparison

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Both Jewett and Carr affirm the essential sexlessness of God. In these excerpts, Jewett draws on multiple Biblical texts to support that position, but Carr simply assumes it.

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<sup>1</sup> Apparently argued in sections of his book prior to this excerpt.

## Mixed-gendered or non-gendered language?

The alternatives to the traditional Christian language that Jewett offers are limited to speaking of God in mixed-gendered terms (e.g. father, mother, son, daughter), whereas Carr prefers the use of non-gendered language (e.g. parent, friend). This difference has been present in a lot of debate over the past few decades, with the approach by Carr echoing a tradition that includes Paul Tillich and J.A.T. Robinson (Byford 1987). On Jewett's side it seems<sup>2</sup> that Jürgen Moltmann and Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel also focus on mixed-gendered terms (Moltmann-Wendel and Moltmann 1991). Although they note that the goal is not to replace patriarchy with matriarchy but with the reciprocity of true community (Moltmann-Wendel and Moltmann 1991, 37), all their examples show only feminine alternatives to the traditional masculine images.

## Allowing or promoting non-masculine language?

Carr seems more interested in the social reality of how language is used and understood than Jewett, who focusses on "logical necessity" and "hypothetical possibilities". As a result, whereas Jewett is content to *allow* non-masculine references to God, Carr actively *promotes* such linguistic changes. Carr draws on concepts from linguistic pragmatics and socio-linguistics out of a concern for how language choices affect not only our conception of God but also our relationship to that God and to each other.

There is an important sense in which Jewett's emphasis precedes Carr's. If Jewett was wrong and Christian doctrine *did* logically entail that God was male and the consequent elevation of masculinity above femininity, then Carr's project would be irrelevant. In my opinion we should then throw the whole doctrinal system, baby and bathwater, down the drain. If we accept Jewett's position, however, then the next step is to move into Carr's project in an attempt to throw out the patriarchal bathwater while cherishing the freshly clean baby.

## Analogy or metaphor?

Carr draws on a distinction from Sallie McFague between "traditional analogical theology" – perhaps typified by the Jewett reading – and "metaphorical theology". The distinction alludes to a long and complex debate about the relationship between analogy and metaphor that extends back to Aristotle. To some scholars "analogy is a special case of metaphor" (Gentner and Jeziorski 1993, 452) but others believe the converse: that "metaphor is a form of likening, comparing, or analogizing" (Hills 2012). For myself, the fundamental difference is that analogy is a thought pattern whereas metaphor is necessarily linguistic.

To understand Carr's position, however, we must start with the distinction that McFague makes, namely that metaphors highlight *dissimilarity* whereas symbolic or analogical relationships highlight *similarity* (McFague 1983, 13). Carr's concern with "traditional analogical theology" is that it over-emphasises the similarities between God and human concepts. Viewing theological language as metaphor rather than analogy emphasises the differences: that beneath any claim "God is X" lies an implication that God is fundamentally other-than-X. The metaphoric perspective highlights the limitation of ascribing *any* attribute to God.

It is difficult to ascertain whether Jewett's view is blinkered by this conception of analogy, although in the available excerpt all his examples do refer to similarities rather than to dissimilarities. He accepts that there are equally valid similarities between God and human females as there are between God and human males. But Carr is proposing that both male and female metaphors, while ostensibly pointing to similarities, ultimately show that God is neither.

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<sup>2</sup> I say "seems" because I am not sure that the cited work is fully representative of their matured position.

## Conclusion

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In this review of articles by Paul Jewett and Anne Carr, I have noted that although both affirm the theological validity of non-masculine language when referring to God, their approaches differ in at least three ways. While Carr promotes the use of non-masculine language, Jewett merely allows it. While Carr proposes several non-gendered alternatives to masculine terminology, Jewett only offers feminine terminology that parallels the masculine. While Carr explicitly positions her critique in terms of metaphor, Jewett phrases his in terms of analogy.

In my opinion, Jewett is correct in asserting that there is no logical necessity in the choice of masculine terms relating to God, and as a consequence, Carr is justified in focussing on the pragmatic and socio-linguistic implications of sexist theological language. Although I concur with Carr's preference for non-gendered alternatives, her reliance on a non-standard definition of metaphor does little to support her case.

## Reference List

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