

Language about God

1. The Church of England has started worrying about the language used both in talking about God and in worship. Now it is tempting to assume that any topic which the state religion takes up must be fatuous, but in this case it is not as simple as that. So even if the conclusion will be that nothing can in practice be done, it is right to understand what the problems are, and the difficulties of solution. We will have to keep in mind several related issues – the truth about God, how to translate Scripture, the form of public worship in the congregation, and what is advisable in private devotion.
2. The best starting-point is the first of the 39 Articles of Religion. The one living and true God is “without body, parts, or passions”. In the Incarnation, indeed, Christ took upon himself body, parts, and passions – though, unlike us, he made a right use of them. And Christ was (and exalted remains) not some abstract form of humanity, nor a hermaphrodite, but a male. Yet he is the Saviour of all, both male and female (and including eunuchs, see Acts 8.26 to the end) – there is perhaps a problem here, but it is too big for discussion in this context.
3. All language about God is analogous. We talk of the Father eternally begetting the Son. Now a classical (Greek or Roman) male god was thought to be fully equipped with male genitals and to father children in the ordinary way, in time. This is not the eternal relationship within the Trinity. Nor is it what happens at the Annunciation. Mary comes to be with child by word, not by sexual act.
4. We use human language because we have nothing better, and must never forget that it is inadequate. We will always be saying, if we are wise, that what we think we understand about God is like this – and yet not completely so or without the need to balance it with some other insight.
5. God himself chooses to explain himself through language. Not in “earthquake, wind, and fire” but in the “still small voice” (and while that hymn is best not used, there is nothing wrong with the story of Elijah). For an event, however spectacular, does not in general convey a meaning of itself.
6. All human language is imperfect. We do well to respect the myth of the Tower of Babel. It is only rarely that a word in one language has an exact equivalent in another; generally, those who speak the same language manage to communicate much, but not all, of their meaning, but the process of translation, when required, inevitably reduces the extent of communication. If we had a perfect language, we would be no better off, because we would still need to translate it! Beware, therefore, of putting too much trust in any translation, however scrupulous. It cannot be perfect even if you wish to assert that the original was perfect (and, moreover, that we have access to that original).
7. When, in the sixteenth century, theologians decided that a knowledge of Greek and Hebrew was essential, they were doomed to use the same tools as they used to learn Latin. These were the tools of grammarians. For learning Greek, the tools were mostly harmless. For Hebrew, it seemed obvious to a grammarian that all nouns in Hebrew were either “masculine” or “feminine”, just as that Hebrew verbs had a “past” and a “future” (but not a “present”!) tense. All of this is distortion of the way that Hebrew (and cognates like Aramaic) actually worked, and an analysis unimaginable for centuries before (or after) Christ. And we do not understand the patterns of thought which Hebrew favours (or hinders) by imposing an alien grammar on it.
8. The “feminine” is indeed used in Hebrew for persons or animals undoubtedly female. But “the Preacher” in Ecclesiastes is a “feminine” form – though nobody ever doubted that Solomon was male! Clearly this is not derogatory, rather the contrary. (That said, there is a tendency to change proper names ending in -baal to -bosheth (shame), partly to suppress the perceived reference to the false god Baal, but perhaps also to use a “feminine” form as derogatory.) It might be safer to say that there is a tendency (no more than that) to use a “feminine” form for what is atypical.
9. All the words used for the true God in Hebrew are grammatically “masculine” (one of them seems plural in form, but always has a singular verb). Mechanically, therefore, if a pronoun has to be expressed concerning God in Hebrew (often, as in Greek and Latin, it does not), it will be “he” or “him”. There is no way of expressing “it” in Hebrew, and in any case God is more like a person than a thing. (Ironically, “it” is extremely rare in the Authorised Version.) However note that both the Wisdom and the Spirit of God (but not the Word) are grammatically “feminine” in Hebrew.

10. The Jews must have known that other nations had goddesses. Not least, Solomon went after “Ashtoreth the goddess of the Zidonians”. In later times, quite apart from the classical gods of the Greeks and Romans, they would be aware of Isis and Cybele – and knew or assumed the worst about their cults. Hence feminine language about the true God was never going to come naturally.
11. Both Greek and Latin do have a grammatical “neuter”, but the New Testament only once uses a “neuter” noun in relation to God (in Paul's speech to the Areopagus). Ironically a grammatically “feminine” form is slightly more common. But all these are instances of abstract thought or something like philosophy, not in any context of how a christian relates to God.
12. A simple form of the dangers of taking grammar too seriously - “Spirit” is grammatically feminine in Hebrew, neuter in Greek and masculine in Latin. Which is “right”? And there is a risk of drifting into impersonal language about the Spirit. “It” will not do. So we fall back on “he” (while, to be honest, noting that the Hebrew does in this instance give us a case for “she”).
13. English is unlike all these languages in that most nouns do not have a grammatical gender. Also, in English we have to express the subject of the verb, so “he” or “she” are bound to be visible in translation far more frequently than they are visible in Hebrew, Latin or Greek originals. We do not have (though some now seek) a wide repertoire of pronouns. If we did, then we might argue for a distinctive set of pronouns for God, to reflect the “without body, parts, or passions” from which we started. But we have not got them – and if we had, that way leads to mutual unintelligibility.
14. Now there was a stage in English when there might not have been a problem. Earlier usage including the Prayer Book accepted that the superficially masculine would include the feminine. Eventually, the “Interpretation Act” meant that, unless the context clearly required otherwise, the masculine must legally be taken to include the feminine. So in most contexts equality was achieved in law without the need for endless recital of “he or she” and amendment of all existing legislation.
15. In the same way, “man” included “woman”. (There is a line in Juvenal in which a rebellious wife asserts for herself the standard tag “homo sum”, lazily translated “I am a man” – she is right, because it in its original context means “I am a human person” and have rights accordingly.) It seems we have now become too sensitive for this solution - “man” has now come to imply “male”. Perhaps, eventually, we will accept a development of English which has an elegant and practical alternative, capable of being used in ordinary casual conversation. But none is in sight as yet.
16. Our problem as continuing Anglicans, incidentally, is that we have no mechanism for change even if we could see what that change should be. We are inclined to prefer an approach to translation which reflects (as far as possible) the original as it is, even at the cost of having to explain it. This is true within limits; there is no simple way of expressing the Hebrew “infinitive absolute” in English, and it is pointless to express in translation the way that “and” in some forms of Hebrew reverses the “tense” of a following verb. In Greek, we accept that a neuter plural nominative takes a singular verb, so we do not translate “there was slain names of men seven thousand” (Apocalypse 11.13).
17. Sometimes indeed in the Bible it is probably true that the masculine implies the feminine, but we think it wrong that the translator should decide the matter if the effect is to suppress the evidence. Psalm 112.1 “Blessed is the man” might include the female, but the matter is doubtful because the psalm rather assumes the duties that go with male headship. Psalm 119.9 “Wherewithal shall a young man cleanse his way” is clear, because there is a specific word for “young man”; this is not advice for both sexes even if we suspect that the advice for a young woman would not be very different. And obviously in Proverbs 31.10 to the end the female does not imply the male!
18. Not that we are in a position to produce our own translation of the Bible. However, this is not to assert that there is nothing which we, like any other Christian body, can control.
19. It is useful to review in this context how the early Church used Scripture. Paul did not carry the entire written Hebrew Bible with him, either in Hebrew or in Greek. This, given the technology then in use, as we know from the Dead Sea Scrolls, would have been in size and weight something like twenty four rolls of flock wallpaper! Let alone if he also took with him copies of his letters. We may assume that a synagogue (if accessible) had at least the five books of the Torah, perhaps more.

20. A Christian congregation would perforce only use what it could get. The making of copies was slow and expensive – especially if the more durable parchment was preferred to papyrus. It is only after the peace of the Church that at least the bigger churches would have in the form of a physical book what we would recognise as a Bible (in Greek), not least because technology had changed and book format instead of scrolls was now possible. But also, it seems, because the newly Christian state made gifts to such churches of copies of its approved edition of the Bible – which remains a significant puzzle in trying to establish the original text of the New Testament writings.
21. So the early Church could not and did not read the entire Bible. It was necessarily selective, particularly as it probably only met on Sundays. There were scholars such as Origen who did attempt to stabilise the whole text and to study the whole corpus of Scripture, but they were rare.
22. In practice, it is nearer to the truth to say that doctrine tended to drive what texts were read (and so more likely to be copied) and how they were understood (the use of allegorical interpretation is important). This extends to losing interest in some topics. It is obvious that “Son of Man” is an important topic in the Gospels, but very little use is made of the phrase afterwards.
23. Until the inventions of paper and of printing, it remained unlikely for an ordinary parish to have a copy of the Bible. Monastic and other communities did have such copies and the time to read much of them in worship. You may find “canon tables” in surviving copies, which state what is to be read each day of each month. But it was never possible to read all of the Bible in an annual cycle.
24. Cranmer had the advantages of paper, printing and state authority, so he did insist that every parish had to have a Bible – of course, of the state-approved translation. He also imposed in both Prayer Books rules for what was to be read as public worship each day of the calendar year at Morning and Evening Prayer. Note that though the whole New Testament (except the Apocalypse) was read each year, only parts of the Old Testament (including Apocrypha) were read. (Cranmer had earlier discovered that if the clergy were allowed any discretion, the smuttier parts of Ezekiel were repeatedly read.) As he made no separate provision for Sundays apart from the epistle and gospel readings, an ordinary congregation attending morning and evening worship on Sundays would over a period of years hear large parts of Scripture in worship, albeit in a random pattern.
25. It was left to some later protestants to believe that all of the Bible should be read, that all of it was equally useful, and that only the literal sense counted. That way leads to taking “the Lord is a man of war” as an essential truth – and so to Cromwell and his massacres. We do not go that way.
26. The history of the Christian use of the psalms is somewhat different. The early Church again used them selectively, but the monastic tradition did make the entire psalter its basis of worship (or private devotion), often on a weekly cycle. Versions of that cycle were eventually imposed on ordinary parish clergy, and Cranmer's only significant change was to adopt a monthly cycle. So an ordinary congregation attending morning and evening worship on Sundays would be likely to experience every psalm some time in each year. (This is separate from the metrical psalms which might be used before or after, but not in, worship. Their selection was never regulated.)
27. Practical experience (beginning with Cranmer himself) showed that there was a need for a more systematic approach to Sundays and feasts, so the Church of England gradually adopted separate rules for psalms and lessons on such days. A consequence was that even if it was felt that the entire psalter ought to be used on Sundays, the less edifying psalms could be appointed for Sundays which rarely happened (Epiphany 6, for example). A less happy consequence of proper lessons for Sundays was that the ordinary Sunday worshiper would never hear most of the Bible read in church. Also the clergy, required to say morning and evening prayer daily, would not infrequently have to use the same psalm or lesson on a Sunday and a weekday immediately before or after it.
28. Particularly for the clergy saying the whole psalter, it is important with what spiritual assumptions this is done. For a time, after the development of theological colleges, it was possible to teach a Christian approach to the psalms. The danger now is that the necessities of passing exams in “theology” (which means an alleged original meaning or a history of academic scholarship, not the truth of God) swamps the time needed to develop Christian spirituality.

29. The selective approach, anyway, is unavoidable and only become more so as people ceased to attend both Morning Prayer and Communion, or either of these and Evening Prayer. Even this selectivity would be concerning if it were not inevitable, because it means the Church is judging Scripture (at least for purposes of worship) rather than being judged by it. But while one can avoid (by not selecting) limited passages like the so-called cursing psalms, one cannot practically deselect a pervasive phenomenon like the use of masculine pronouns for God.
30. Simply, if we are to reflect the realities of Scripture in public worship, which is a basic principle in Anglicanism, we will not avoid the use of “masculine” language. We can advise that the words we cannot avoid should not be understood as implying that God is male (with such aspects of masculinity as are, rightly or wrongly, thought toxic), but we have no way of altering them. Quite apart from the husband-wife relationship found occasionally in the Old Testament, the Father-Son relationship is fundamental to the self-understanding (and the piety) of Christ. We can neither deselect nor alter it and call ourselves Christians. We cannot claim the authority to decide that Christ was wrong on so fundamental a matter as this!
31. This is not intended as an attack on the dignity of women (as if any fallen person of either sex had a title to dignity other than the dignity of redemption). Paul rightly implied that women were equal in salvation, because there is only one baptism. The early Church rapidly discovered that they were also equal in martyrdom, and so the ancient Roman eucharistic prayer rightly names six female martyrs. Later experience showed that they were equal in mysticism (Julian of Norwich is in the same league as the other English mystics of her time, and Teresa with the Spanish) and in theology (the Roman church recognised female Doctors of the Church long before modern times).
32. Nor is this a rejection of all female imagery in relation to God. The Old Testament does use some motherly imagery of God, and Christ likewise uses the image of the mother hen and her chickens. That is sufficient warrant for appropriate use in public worship; and Julian of Norwich is perfectly orthodox in seeing God as our Mother. It could not be wrong to make use of Holy Wisdom as, in some sense beyond the merely grammatical, female, since that is what Proverbs (to say nothing of the Wisdom of Solomon) does.
33. For private devotion use of such imagery must also be acceptable. As a Church, we cannot effectively regulate private prayer, and can only advise. I do not think any Christian is required to preserve the exact balance of Scripture, whatever that is, in private prayer. Indeed, how could this balance be known? The Holy Spirit does not guide every Christian in the same way. That said, there must be limits. As already said, all images of God are imperfect. To concentrate on one type of image, especially if it is not very prominent in Scripture and Christian experience, is dangerous if not heretical.
34. It would be appropriate to discuss “toxic masculinity” since this is certainly part of the perceived problem, but that is itself a large topic, so would be better as a separate paper. Suffice it that unrealistic masculine role models do exist and some are so harmful that the term “toxic” is right, but the task is to advocate a model which is both possible in the society we cannot avoid being part of and better than the prevalent self-indulgence (which affects both sexes).
35. In summary: God is without body, parts or passions, and all talk about God is analogous. We cannot change scripture, only understand the weaknesses inherent in translation and sometimes introduced by it. We cannot control the way language evolves; most of such change is for the worse, and while we can we should resist it, but this may not be possible in the long run. We may have to change in order to be intelligible. We cannot do much about the language of public worship, since so much of that is scriptural. There is little point in reducing the mere number of occurrences of “masculine” pronouns when we know we cannot eliminate them. We do have a duty to explain what we cannot change.
36. This paper is based on a course of sermons preached in Lent 2023. Unfortunately, the notes for one of those sermons are not to hand. If they become available, the paper will be revised.