

Possible title: Liturgical sons and lovers

What Language Shall I Borrow? God-talk in worship: a male response to feminist theology

Brian Wren

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The day I began this book, I was down to read the Second Reading, from Galatians 4, at morning Mass on the feast of Mary, Mother of God. I read: "When the appointed time came, God sent his Son ... to enable us to be adopted as sons. The proof that you are sons is that God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts ... and it is this that makes you a son ..." I looked up, to proclaim "This is the Word of the Lord". All but one of the congregation were women. I nearly choked over the Allelulia, at the absurdity of it all.

This is the problem Brian Wren identifies and tackles in this splendid book. It is a problem that has been born and come to maturity in such a short time. Twenty years ago, I would not have felt the absurdity. Twenty years only, to have become so aware about the problem of linguistic gender! Within a generation, to see such dramatic changes in English usage (in pronoun preference, the use of the *-man* suffix, new forms of address). I can't think of a faster linguistic development in the history of the language.

Brian Wren is a mixture of theologian, linguist, poet, and hymn writer. He has written a book which should be read by everyone, but especially by those (both men and women) who were put off by the wild excesses of the first feminists, whose manner alienated many of their potential allies, and who displayed little real understanding of the forces within language. He shows that it is possible to debate these highly emotive issues quietly, sympathetically, persuasively. He reviews the essential features of the argument, supporting his views by a battery of footnotes, located

undistractingly at the back of the book, which show wide reading in the relevant theological, biblical, literary critical, linguistic, and feminist literature. He claims the intellectual parentage of the fine biblical scholar, George Caird, and it shows. And, most effective of all, he supports his views by showing how the general issues raised can be addressed in liturgical practice, through the texts of his hymns. Several of these hymns are reprinted in "Gallery" sections interspersed between chapters, often with illuminating comments on their genesis and purpose.

The focus of the book is on the way history has shaped our language so that it represents God in terms of power, control, and in almost exclusively male terms. Wren's argument is that this is a distortion. It is not just a linguistic problem but a theological one. If our naming of God is distorted, he argues, our knowledge of God will be also. Sexism is a theological problem, because God has created two coequal genders, and it is not his intention that one should dominate the other.

This situation urgently needs to change, but it will be difficult, because male-dominant language is found throughout the Bible and liturgical history. We therefore need to devise fresh images, which maintain continuity with traditional Christianity yet are free from male bias, so that they enlarge our vision of God. Wren's purpose is to help people to liberate themselves from the narrow and distorting perspective imposed by the old linguistic tradition, which is a reflex of a patriarchal society.

His first section gives an account of the way that this society manifests itself, both in social and linguistic terms - concepts of toughness, superiority, and control, God as King, Lord, Father, Almighty, Majesty, Protector. It is a section full of contemporary references and images - sexual violence, the arms race, political figures and the way they talk.

His second section is about the nature of language - a discussion of how the power of language affects the way we think and behave, and how metaphors are used to depict God. Language change, he argues, is an essential part of action: to stop using sexist language does not stop sexism, but it does force us to think about what we really believe.

What, then, are the revealing metaphors? What new metaphors do we need. His final section is an exploration of new names - of God as Lover, Light, Life, Dance. His hymns take up the search: God is "holy, haunting beauty", "energy of love", "spinner of chaos", "gambler-God", "aching God ... glad of good surprises".... Above all, Wren wants variety in God-images. He wants the new images to move us on - towards a community based on mutual love and not solely on authority structure. In particular, this new language must renew our awareness of the unique place of the Trinity in Christian belief. He looks in all directions for sources of new images, and finds them - though, oddly, he doesn't look in one direction where he might have found some direct help. There is very little reference to the way the Catholic tradition has developed its feminine language through its focus on the person of Mary. This too is a rich source of metaphor, and although Brian Wren doesn't ignore Mary, I was surprised he didn't examine Marian language more closely.

There is no argument in this book, therefore, simply to replace "he" language by "she" language"; and on the occasions when Wren does deliberately insert "she" terms into his exposition - to help shock the reader out of an unthinking patriarchal frame of mind - I found it distracting. Replacing masculine by feminine pronouns is a crude, mechanical and superficial device, which is - as he recognises - just as distorting. To have a passage where "she" language is used to the exclusion of "he" language alienates me in just the way I imagine a passage exclusively in "he" terms alienates an aware woman reader. Wren, of course, knows what he is doing, when he adopts this style. He is making a point. But I find it a somewhat cliched and unfruitful point. There are better ways of surprising us, and making us think anew.

Take the image of God as "Lover". The word has been so savaged by sexual overtones that it takes a moment to realise that there is a deeper and more valuable sense. Can it be salvaged? Can we get through the illicit overtone and tap the depth of emotion which is part of the reality of being a "lover"? I was sceptical, at first. Now, having lived with the metaphor for a few weeks, and thought about it at intervals, I find it as natural as breathing. Other images are more difficult. I find "Sister God", "Mother of Wisdom", and the general use of "She" as difficult to assimilate as I do the unconstrained use of "Father" and "He". On the other hand, I delight in the introduction of fresh collocations, so that words from different traditions of description are juxtaposed, such as "Strong mother God ... Warm father God". This is the best solution, surely - to see the male metaphors not as wrong, but as incomplete, as missing out on a whole dimension of human experience which is valid and vivid. The same argument can - and I hope one day will - be seen to apply with equal force to female metaphors. Combined, the two dimensions can provide a level of insight which, once accepted, makes each seem lonely and bereft when viewed in isolation. It is towards the fulfilment of this vision that Brian Wren's book makes such a powerful contribution.

Envoi

After Mass, on the Feast of Mary, Mother of God, I asked a group of female son-friends whether they had noticed anything odd about the Second Reading. No one had. I explained what was in my mind. Only one seemed at all bothered. We have a long road ahead, it seems. But the signposts along the road somehow seem clearer now, after reading this book.

David Crystal