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To cite this article: Merete Thomassen (2021) Responding to the sacred, International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church, 21:3-4, 301-306, DOI: [10.1080/1474225X.2022.2024965](https://doi.org/10.1080/1474225X.2022.2024965)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1474225X.2022.2024965>



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Published online: 07 Feb 2022.



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Responding to the sacred

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, three dilemmas in liturgical gender-inclusive language are discussed: firstly, if there is any need for gender-inclusive language at all among Christian people; secondly, to what extent gender-inclusive language confirms or challenges binary gender categories; and, thirdly, how queer theory could be a useful tool to develop a non-binary theological language whilst also recognising the risks this might pose to making women invisible. The dilemmas are illuminated by examples from the discussion of gender-inclusive language in the (Lutheran) Church of Norway over a period of twenty years from a liturgy made for 8th March in 1993 to a comprehensive liturgical reform of the principal Sunday service in 2011. This led to a very moderate use of gendered metaphors, either male or female, in the liturgy. In the Church of Norway, it seems that inclusive language's most important contribution to theological speech lies in the insights of metaphorical theology. God *is* neither a man, nor *is* She a woman, and the theological speech demands a broad variety in metaphors used for God.

KEYWORDS

Feminist theology; gender-inclusive language; metaphorical theology; liturgical language; feminist theory; queer theory

In this paper, I will address three questions or dilemmas regarding gender-inclusive language with particular relevance to liturgy. First, I would like to ask if there is any use in challenging the androcentric language of God. Next, I want to discuss one special dilemma raising from using gendered language, which is the risk of confirming binary gender categories. Finally, I want to point to some analytical categories from the Swedish feminist theologian Anne-Louise, who identifies feminist theology as a critical and constructive project which can help us to identify both the problems and the possibilities in gender-inclusive language.

What is the use of gender-inclusive language?

Does it matter whether God is addressed as He, She or It? For many churchgoers the traditional male images of God are uncomplicated. Our images of God are personal. For many of us, they have been an integral part of our spirituality since we were children and they feel crucial for our faith. When I have been speaking in Norwegian parishes and taught the principles of gender-inclusive language, people have tended to react negatively. A woman once sneered at me after one of my lectures: ‘Thank you for having

destroyed my image of God!’ The theme obviously disturbs some people’s sense of security with their personal image of God. Why should this be disturbed, or even destroyed, by some odd feminist theological idea?

Is there any need for gender-inclusive language among Christian people? Is gender-inclusive language simply a special interest for somewhat remote academic feminist scholars?

I have two answers to these questions. Images of God are plural. The Bible does not use one image for God, but many images. The reason for this Biblical plurality of images is that God is far more than human language. God is not identical with the metaphors and images used in *God talk*. The Bible is full of images and metaphors, but Christians are used to using only some few of them such as Father, Lord, Shepherd or King. Gender-inclusive language is trying to extend the use of metaphors by seeking out the full richness of the Biblical metaphors. By using several metaphors to describe God we become aware that the language of God never fully can cover the nature of God. In our limited human existence, we can only try to grasp a little of God through language. By using a variety of metaphors, we can grasp a little more than we are used to. But God is always more: *Deus semper major*.

The American theologian Sallie McFague writes in her well-known monograph from 1983, *Metaphorical Theology*, that if we are not aware of the metaphorical nature of theological language, we risk two mistakes in our religious speech: idolatry and irrelevance.¹

By idolatry, McFague means that we risk worshiping the metaphor, not the reality behind the metaphor. We worship the metaphor ‘Lord’ and the metaphor ‘Father’, not the ungraspable reality behind these metaphors.

By irrelevance, McFague means that God-talk becomes irrelevant because of the lack of understanding of the metaphorical nature of religious language. McFague argues that in pre-modern times, people lived in a metaphorical universe when it was more obvious for most people that metaphors were metaphors, and not a literal description of an objective reality. And so, therefore, it was more common to develop new metaphors to make theological speech relevant. Religious language burgeoned. But now, by losing of sight the metaphorical nature of theological speech, we risk losing its very life and relevance. The absolutist ‘King’ as a common metaphor for God is irrelevant for many people today, even though it remains in common liturgical use.

The risk of idolatry and irrelevance is the first issue with regard to the question of the use of gender-inclusive language.

The other answer has to do with understanding of power. ‘If God is male, then the male is God’ is a well-known citation by Mary Daly in her book *Sexism and God-talk* from 1973.² The metaphors we choose in our God-talk are never random. We deify the things that we think are most valuable in our own time and society. The Bedouin chief, the King, the Lord, the Roman Emperor and the absolutist King are examples of deified figures in the history of religious language. God is always described through metaphors which reflect for us what we consider as most admirable. An analysis of the metaphors and images from our own time might reflect that we consider the coach or the therapist as that which is most admirable, but that might be another discussion.

¹McFague, *Metaphorical theology. Models of God in Religious Language*.

²Daly, *Beyond God the father. Towards a Philosophy of Women’s Liberation*.

In any case, throughout the Jewish-Christian tradition men and patriarchy are constantly deified by the use of male and patriarchal metaphors in almost all theological language. Three medieval women and writers, Hildegard von Bingen, Mechthild of Magdeburg and Julian of Norwich are rare and significant exceptions from patriarchal theological speech, but even if they were to a degree influential in their own time, their influence has waned with time.

Modern feminist theology seeks to destabilise the asymmetric male use of images. Even if this does not feel appropriate for many members of our parishes, the case does not therefore lack importance.

Heteronormativity, gender dichotomies and binary oppositions

What happens when woman and female images of God come to be used in theological speech?

‘Making women visible’ was a 1970 feminist theological slogan. The feminist project was to use feminine metaphors for God and to mention women more widely in liturgical and theological texts. In the Church of Norway, the Ecumenical Decade of ‘Churches in Solidarity with Women, 1988–1998’ was a point of departure for official and approved gender-inclusive liturgies. The first liturgy using gender-inclusive language authorised by Church of Norway was a liturgy created for 8 March, International Women’s Day. In the Confession, God was addressed as God, ‘our Mother and Father’, and the concluding blessing was proclaimed in the name of the Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. The congregation were addressed as ‘Sisters and Brothers’ and ‘God’s Daughters and Sons’.³

The reaction from the more conservative parts of church was fierce. Such liturgies were accused of being heretical and a break with the biblical and theological traditions of the church. They were also accused of being an attack on the church from outside by secular feminist threats.

In my own doctoral thesis on gender-inclusive liturgical language, I analysed not only the liturgies, but also the debates caused by them. The thesis is in Norwegian but the title in English would be *Gender Inclusive Language. An Analysis of Norwegian Liturgies under The Ecumenical Decade “Churches in Solidarity With Women 1988–1998*, Faculty of Theology, University of Oslo 2008.⁴ The resistance to the liturgies from conservative voices were as expected. Even more interesting than the conservative reactions were the arguments from feminist theologians themselves and male theologians who were positive to the gender-inclusive project. ‘God’s feminine nature’ was described as something different from ‘God’s masculine nature’. The ‘Mother God’ was regarded as being more caring and nurturing, more emotional and more embodied than the ‘Father God’. Some of the same heteronormative arguments were used to argue for women’s need for gender-inclusive language: women are more ‘down-to-earth’, more nurturing and more concerned with birth-giving and child-raising. It was claimed that women needed a more

³In my doctoral thesis *Kjønnsinkluderende liturgisk språk. En analyse av norske gudstjenester under Det økumeniske tiåret 1988–1998*, Faculty of Theology, University of Oslo 2008, I provide a presentation of the 8 March liturgy and the following discussion.

⁴Thomassen, ‘Construction of Gender, Liturgies and Dichotomies from a Norwegian Perspective’.

poetic and reflective language in opposition to men who were supposed to prefer a more dogmatic and precise language. In the debate, the feminism expressed was an obvious feminism of difference.

It is no surprise that conservative theologians argue for heteronormativity and binary oppositions. It is far more surprising to notice that some feminist theologians have argued in the same way. The conclusion to my thesis was that gender-inclusive language risked confirming patriarchal language rather than challenging it, inasmuch as it had not become aware of the need to avoid heteronormativity and binary oppositions.

The conclusion so far is that some gender-inclusive liturgies tend to be dichotomic in the use of binary oppositions. Yet this is true of many, but not all such liturgies. Considering Sallie McFague's point about deifying whatever we consider as most admirable, in some gender-inclusive liturgies the nuclear family risks becoming deified by its overwhelming mother, father, brother, sister, son and daughter images. To turn Mary Daly's claim upside down in order to face itself: if God is mother, then mothers are God. But what about women who are not mothers? What about women who are mothers, but who have not given birth to their children? Most of all: what about women who have given birth? Is motherhood all that is to say about such women?

In my thesis, I asked for more discussions which reflected our new knowledge regarding gender. Women are more than mothers, men are more than fathers, and human beings are living in far more diverse relationships than the post-Second World War nuclear-family constructions.

Gender-inclusive language as a critical and constructive project

Does gender matter? Since I defended my thesis in 2007, the discussion of gender has become much more aware of fluid categories within gender. This makes it easier to avoid binary oppositions, but it also makes it more difficult to claim the need for women's visibility. If gender is a social construction, why argue for making one specific gender being visible?

However, feminist theology and gender-inclusive language is, according to the Swedish theologian Anne-Louise Eriksson in her doctoral thesis *The Meaning of Gender in Theology. Problems and Possibilities* from 1995, partly a critical project and partly a constructive project.⁵ As a critical project, feminist theology and gender-inclusive language succeeds in making church and theology aware of its patriarchal heritage. By insisting on women as fully-fledged participants in church and theology, and by insisting on non-patriarchal God-talk, feminist theology works as an eye-opener for theologically gendered asymmetry. As a critical project, the arguments arise from a non-binary feminism of sameness.

As a constructive project, the argumentation arises from a different kind of feminism, a binary feminism of difference. Because women represent something *else* than men, it is important to include them. Eriksson identifies a gender analytical inconsistency, which causes several problems. Feminist theology as a constructive project risks confirming patriarchal language by stressing the difference of women from men instead of stressing

⁵Eriksson, *The Meaning of Gender in Theology – Problems and Possibilities*.

women's inclusion in a common humanity. One of the questions along the road is how to continue to insist on making women visible without reproducing stereotypes and binary oppositions.

The German-American liturgist Teresa Berger identifies a similar question in the monograph *Women's Way of Worship*:

“There is a paradox here, if nothing else. Feminist liturgies struggle against an asymmetrical gendered liturgical tradition with liturgies far more asymmetrically gendered than even before. In Feminist liturgies, gender openly becomes a, if not *the*, dominant feature of worship. In fact, the very existence of these liturgies is rooted in accepting the category of gender as a fundamental marker of human identity and of the Church's liturgical life.”⁶

Even if Berger quite precisely identifies the problem of accepting gender as a fundamental category, a new question arises. This question is how to continue to reflect on the insights of gender analysis without making women as an analytical category irrelevant. The questions above are to a large extent corresponding with the dilemmas raised by the American Queer theorist Judith Butler. The category ‘women’ constantly risks be filled with too much content while simultaneously emptying it of content. With too much content, the category risks essentialism and binary concepts of women and gender. With lack of content, women as a political (and theological, in our context) subject is lost. If gender is an uninteresting or even non-existing category, feminism becomes meaningless. Deconstructing gender is by that means an exercise that demands awareness in society, culture and Church as well.

So far, it seems that inclusive language's most important contribution to theological speech, not least within the liturgy, lies in the insights of metaphorical theology. God *is* neither a man, nor *is* She a woman; however, with all human beings being created in the image of God, it means that we all in some way or another possess similarities with, and in relationship, to God. That is why it is relevant to reflect God's diverse gender.

Notes on contributor

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⁶Berger, *Women's Way of Worship. Gender Analysis and Liturgical History*, 145.

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