

Why is God (Still) a “He”?

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I consider the question of why Christians still use a male God pronoun, given that we do not know God directly. The biology argument is unsound because the premise that God is a male being is false or at least unknowable. The convenience argument (it would be greatly inconveniencing to change the God pronoun) is not entirely convincing because we have once migrated from referring to mankind as a “he” to a “she” and then to using the two interchangeably. The fact that all references to God are metaphorical because we do not know God directly is considered, but does not remove the concern why a male rather than a female metaphorical preference. The feminist approach is considered, but is not entirely convincing since it simply asks us to change the God pronoun from a “He” to a “She”, a transfer that has no clear rationale or principled argument. And the gender fairness argument (we should call God a “He” and “She” interchangeably) is intellectually sound but practically demoralizing (with reasons) in the context of the activity of worshipping God. In sum, the convenience argument seems to win by default: it is not only inconveniencing, but also religiously inconveniencing to refer to God with interchangeable pronouns.

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1. Introduction

Why do Christians (still) call God a “He”. If God is neither human nor biological, God may either be asexual or sexual. In strict terms, this means that God is as consistent with the asexual pronoun (It) as God is with the sexual ones (He, She). If God is the “Ultimate Principle” of the universe, there arises no need to refer to God in biological terms. Nothing prevents us from conceiving and relating with God in our daily lives as a *principle* rather than a human-like entity.

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There is an entire host of behavioural manifestations resulting from the biological conception of God. Someone could walk up to you in church and whisper, "Please, take your hands out of your pockets, you are in God's presence." For the same reason, men in cultures where it is disrespectful for a male to wear a cap in front of a superior are advised to remove their caps upon entering a church service, and women in cultures that frown on not wearing a headgear in the presence of a superior are expected to wear them in worshipping God. But it is human beings, surely not God, that could take offense at your pocketing your hands before them, or wearing your cap, or not wearing your headgear. As another instance, there is the intuitive feeling that praying whilst in a lying position is disrespectful, prompting us often to kneel down to have our prayers heard. The same objection arises that this is what we do to human superiors (such as Emperors with absolute political powers). Could we arrive at a point in history when these behaviours could vanish? That would depend on what happens to the very concept upon which the behaviours are based, for which I find this discussion quite significant.

Since this paper debates what pronoun we could address God in, I need clarify which stipulative pronoun I could use here for God. Since the paper debates why we should use a male pronoun, no one would expect me to use it, even stipulatively.

In addition, questioning the male God pronoun should be taken as a philosophical exercise: I am not necessarily a feminist. Since the concern is gender fairness, I will also resist the temptation to use the female pronoun. The result is that I would plead for a uniquely special case: the article might need to restrict itself to the use of the "God" noun in all references to God, since the same article discusses the pronouns.

The background to this debate is the predominant God pronoun in Christianity. So this article does not address the God pronoun in other religions such as Buddhism, Hinduism, Sikhism, the Animist religions, paganism, neopaganism, and so on).

I am also aware that the traditional distinction between male and female has received a jolt with the discovery of transgendered people. There might be female men and male women (Rea 2016, 103). But these go-betweens do not yet *overwhelm* the traditional gender distinction in the sense of *completely* collapsing the distinction between male and female. As such, my use of these distinctions (male/female, masculine/feminine) should not be interpreted as ignorance of the currently contested status quo regarding gender.

2. The biology argument

The most usual argument for the male pronoun is biology. This is because biology makes gender possible. It could be argued that we refer to God with the male pronoun because He is male. The argument could be stated as follows:

1. God is a male.
2. Male animals are identified with the male pronoun.
3. God is identified with the male pronoun.

The argument is valid, but one of the premises, the first premise, is false. God is not an animal, and can therefore not be classified as a male. In fact, it might be termed insulting to reduce God to an animal for this kind of classification. As such, the argument is valid but unsound because a premise is false. This kind of *direct* claim based on biology would not work.

To be sure, the direct biological argument is, in all likelihood, what is responsible for the male God pronoun. According to Mary Daly, “If God is male, then the male is God.” She argues that the image of God as male is used to dominate and oppress women. According to Carol Christ,

For many of us in western cultures, feminist criticism of religion began with a protest against this familiar image of God as an Old White Man found in traditional piety. This God is known through the images of Lord, King, and Father. Each of these images is exclusively masculine, and feminists argue that this creates the impression that the highest power in the universe is male. Despite protestations to the contrary, the language of prayer and ritual—assisted in Roman Catholicism and Christian Orthodoxy by painted images, including those of God the Father with a long white beard—creates a picture in our minds that is hard to erase. (Christ 2003, 25–26)

But mankind has come far from that age, and we have learnt that the biology argument, as stated above, is not correct. Indeed, Michael Rea reminds us of the *imago dei* doctrine of Christianity: all humans (men and women) are created in the image and likeness of God (Rea 2016). He uses deductive reasoning beginning with this doctrine to show that gender is an extrinsic divine attribute, and God either has no gender or belongs *equally* to both genders (Rea 2016, 110).

If, however, biology cannot explain why we *still* refer to God with the male pronoun, then what accounts for the phenomenon. Here we consider the social factor that enabled the biological argument to sustain its traction on our minds, even when we had learnt to disprove its major premise. This is the argument of convenience.

3. The convenience argument

Although we have come to realize that a direct biological argument for calling God a “He” is not defensible, it might be argued that the belief has taken hold of mankind by and large, and changing pronouns would be inconveniencing. The convenience argument could go like this:

1. We need to change the God pronoun since the current pronoun is informed by patriarchy.
2. But such a change would be too inconveniencing.
3. We should remain with the currently used God pronoun.

When we examine the above argument, we find that premise 2 has been disproved by our experience with broadening the gender pronoun in, for example, referring to mankind in generic terms. Previously, generic mankind was referred to as a “he”. Now we have reverted to “she” and sometimes interchange the pronouns. As such, premise 2, the convenience premise, is not entirely convincing. We should, after all, do to the God pronoun what we have done to the generic mankind pronoun. This is where we consider the argument for gender fairness. I will come to this argument shortly.

4. The metaphor argument

Much of the literature concerning references to God presents them as metaphorical. This is because, as some scholars argue, we do not have an empirical knowledge of God. In his *Summa Theologica*, for example, Thomas Aquinas had noted that we have different conceptions of God because we do not know God directly (as God is). But Aquinas argued that our intellect knows that these various conceptions refer to the same Being, and therefore our intellect unifies the plurality of predicates and subjects by composition (Aquinas 1947, 165). Janet Martin Soskice drew a distinction between “defining” God and “referring” to God. She argued that divine metaphors only succeed in referring to God but do not define God. She in fact argues that we can only speak metaphorically about God or not at all (Soskice 1985, 140). Sallie McFague takes a similar position when she argues that a metaphor is not a description (McFague 1982, 70). I agree with these scholars that we could only refer to God metaphorically because we do not have an empirical experience of God. So we could only rely on the conceptions that dominated our experiences in the patriarchal past to refer to God. Since we see God as the most dominant being of all beings, our situatedness in patriarchal societies led to the popular reference to God as masculine. And this brings

me back to my original concern: now that we are moving away from patriarchy, why still use the male metaphor? The point that we refer to God only metaphorically does not therefore dismiss my concern about the patriarchal reference to God. It only increases the concern about why we should not thereby change the metaphors according to changing times. The feminist McFague shares my concern. She argues that our general references to God as a kind of monarch have become anachronistic, and, consistent with our current age, we should instead employ references to God as mother, friend and lover (see McFague 1987). And this leads me to the next question: why not change our gender references to God from masculine to feminine?

5. The gender fairness argument

The gender fairness argument could come in two strands. The feminist strand could argue that we revert to referring to God with a female pronoun. We should, from now, begin to call God a “She”. The argument could read like this:

1. Up until now, God has been called a “He”, courtesy of patriarchal beliefs.
2. We are past the age of patriarchy.
3. We should henceforth refer to God as a “She”.

Feminists generally argue that we should begin to re-imagine God as a female (see Ruether 1983; Craighead 1986; McFague 1987; Johnson 1992; Christ 2003).

This argument is appreciated because its premises are both correct. But one notices that the premises, in spite of being correct, do not quite warrant the conclusion, since this conclusion simply transfers us from patriarchy to matriarchy, a moral position that is not expressly superior. Such a conclusion simply recycles the same error committed by the patriarchs in arguing that we should refer to God in their own gender, and is, therefore, strictly philosophically unconvincing in spite of any social attractiveness it may have acquired in and beyond the feminist movement.

Some feminists have gone further to argue that there are certain behaviours that are associated with the male gender, such as violence, aggressiveness, power *over* rather than power *with*, lacking affection and care, and that these attributes come together with addressing God as a male (see Anderson 2001, par 2; Christ 2003, 1, 25–44). This observation is correct. Although it is attractive to re-imagine God as female in order to understand God as compassionate, caring, loving, non-domineering, and so on, such

an option is still incorrect. The reason is that none of these behaviours is the biological preserve of any gender. We have compassionate and considerate men just as we have aggressive, non-compassionate, and domineering women. Also, the emerging transgender world would progressively dilute the gender lines normally attributed to these qualities.

6. The interchangeability argument

Proponents of gender fairness could, however, reformulate their argument toward a more genuine fairness. They could argue as follows:

1. Up until now, God has been called a “He”, courtesy of patriarchal beliefs.
2. We are past the age of patriarchy.
3. We should henceforth refer to God as a “She” and “He” interchangeably.

The philosopher and feminist Charles Hartstone referred to God as a “He-She” and “Him-Her” (Hartstone 1977, 48; Hartstone 1984, 44, 79, 93; Hartstone 1987, 92). Carol Christ (2003) refers to God throughout her book as “Goddess/God” (although she simply uses “Goddess” or “God” individually in several places where she is too fast or tired to use “Goddess/God”). She refers to God when discussing the patriarchal era and Goddess when discussing in her own or the feminists’ context). In certain places, Christ uses “Goddess or God” (see, for instance, Christ 2003, 10, 14, 43, 89, 116, 225, emphasis added).

Now this is really fairness, perhaps the most fairness we can arrive at on the subject matter. But these are mere academic exercises, and referring to God like this is really inconveniencing *in worship*: the interchangeability idea has until now been employed in reference to mankind in generic usages. But God is not generic in this sense: we understand God to be a definite being, something that seems more comfortable with a consistent pronoun. This could be seen when we consider religion *in practice*: it would be quite disconcerting in worship to refer to God as both a “He” and “She” interchangeably. It supplies the uncertain feeling that a worshipper does not even know who she is dealing with. Indeed, it gets a little hard when Christ refers to “...this female” and “...God *and* Goddess...” (Christ 2003, 162, 224), “God-She...” (Christ 2003, 208), “...God-She and Goddess...” (Christ 2003, 229), “...Goddess or God-She...” (Christ 2003, 230), “Goddess or Goddess/God...” (Christ 2003, 236) (emphases added).

It is one thing to acknowledge *intellectually* that we have no direct experience of God and therefore do not really know God. But it is quite another

matter to admit this in our mood as worshippers. When we are making an analogy with an *unknown* or *imaginary* person, we are okay referring to such a person as a “he” and “she” interchangeably. After all, we are simply making an analogy and there is no need for feelings of security and certainty in who we refer to. But worshipping God and asking favours of God require that we adopt the psychology of knowing who exactly we are talking to or about. God in worship assumes the presence of a close friend we think we know quite well, and referring to God in affectionate terms is counterproductive in the context of referring to God in gender interchangeable terms. An example that is close to this (although not a perfect example) is that we cannot convince someone that we are affectionate towards him or her if we could not even remember their names.

In addition, he/she and he-or-she pronouns usually represent psychologically distant and disconnected third parties. Such parties are generic because they are *fictitious* (employed mainly for illustration): and in turn cross-gender because they are generic (we must use interchangeable pronouns for fictitious examples *precisely* because they are certified neither masculine nor feminine). They are abstract, distant, disconnected, and detached precisely because their gender is *not* certified (I feel only as psychologically connected to he-or-she references as I feel to arithmetic figures). When we address God as a He/She and a He-or-She, we invoke the same psychological distance: tolerable in intellectual discourse but not so well in worship.

An objection could be that this psychological distance results from lack of antecedent usage, and that usage with time would simply close the distance. One wishes that this were the case. But there is reason to believe that the disconnectedness generated by the interchangeable pronoun is also syntactic. For example, the “or” in the He-or-She depiction of God (or the silent “or” in the He/She and Him/Her versions) indicates uncertainty. Indeed, it is *dismissive* in practical life to refer to a person as, “(the person’s name) *or* whatever you call yourself...” One therefore sees the enormity of the psychological (and syntactic) obstacles to adopting a worshipful attitude to God with the interchangeable pronoun.

It is psychologically better to refer to God in worship as a “He” or a “She”. But this resurrects the patriarchal and feminist problems we have already examined. Calling God a “He” is patriarchal, and calling God a “She” is not morally superior. Unless there is a different way of understanding any of the three perspectives in contention (the patriarchal, feminist and interchangeability perspectives), we will keep revolving viciously between them.

It all means that the convenience argument is back in new strength. It had been easy to refute the convenience argument because we can really refer to generic mankind as “he” and “she” interchangeably without inconve-

nience. But the interchangeability idea regarding gender pronouns does not seem religiously very encouraging in referring to God, and the convenience argument is not seriously undermined in this context. It can read in its new form as follows:

1. We need to change the God pronoun since the current pronoun is informed by patriarchy.
2. Changing the God pronoun from a “He” to a “She” (patriarchy to matriarchy *simpliciter*) is not a clearly superior moral alternative.
3. Using “He” and “She” interchangeably to refer to God in religious activity is quite discouraging.
4. Until we resolve the problems generated by (2) and (3), we have no option than to remain with the currently used God pronoun.

An objection could be made that the convenience referred here is *convenience in patriarchy*, and refers to being comfortable in a norm established in the patriarchal age. But one would wonder what would be the rationale for such an objection. If, for example, the rationale were feminist, such an objection would be faced again with the (quite unattractive) task of justifying a simple transition from a patriarchal to a matriarchal rendition of the God pronoun. If this task were not successfully executed, a response to such an objection would then be that it is *clearly inconveniencing* to go through the pains of transitioning to an alternative pronoun that is not a clearly superior moral or logical option.

Far from supporting the convenience argument, I only present it in this essay as a dilemma calling for further research. I am open to the idea that we could refer to God with a plural pronoun (as “They”). Referring to single persons with plural pronouns is not strange to the dominant languages of the world, including English and French. Mark Sameth tells us that in the ancient world, “well-expressed gender fluidity was the mark of a civilized person. Such a person was considered more “godlike” (Sameth 2016, par 5). The Hebrew bible, in its original language, referred to Adam as them in Genesis 1: 27 (Sameth 2016, par 3). But I think the most forceful motivation is that in the light of the emerging transgender world, it is not uncommon to use a plural pronoun to refer to people when we are not sure of what gender to address them. The biggest advantage of a plural pronoun is that it is gender neutral.

In the light of the problems we have seen with the biological, convenience, metaphor, gender fairness, and interchangeability arguments, the plural God pronoun appears to represent the only way forward. But I must

not fail to mention that the problem with the plural God pronoun is the psychological image of polytheism (more than one God) it conjures. If we could deal with such a psychological problem, we would have rid the “They” pronoun of its only baggage.

7. Conclusion

The conclusion is that we cannot determine which gender pronoun is appropriate for referring to God. Since we do not know God directly, it seems inappropriate to talk of appropriateness in God pronouns. In the meantime, we must refer to God using a pronoun. This is where the convenience argument currently prevails: simply continue to use the God pronoun that has gained popularity. This victory is one of default: one that kicks in automatically because of the absence of a proper resolution of the matter of an appropriate God pronoun. So when asked why God is (still) a “He”, one could respond by saying “well, convenience.” We may hope that this changes as the transgender programme encourages the use of the plural pronoun in addressing people, and, therefore, addressing God.

In sum, I had posed the question: Why is God (still) a “He”? I considered biological, convenience, metaphor, feminist and gender fairness arguments. These arguments all fail. The convenience argument, although a failure, continues to prevail only by default because others fail as well as it fails. Only a transition to a plural God pronoun can lead us out of this imbroglio, if we could rid it of its polytheist connotation.

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