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CALLING GOD “FATHER” A THEOLINGUISTIC ANALYSIS

Donald D. Hook and Alvin F. Kimel, Jr.

This essay explores the significance and implications of the causal theory of reference for the current debate on the necessity and exchangeability of the divine title ‘Father’ in the discourse of the Church. Identifying ‘Father’ as a vocative term historically grounded in the speech of Jesus and his Apostles, the authors assert that it successfully refers to God, functioning very much like a proper name. They also identify linguistic barriers to its replacement by other terms.

“Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.” With these words the Christ of the Gospels instructs his disciples to pray to the God of Israel. The prayer known as the Our Father or the Lord’s Prayer unites all Christians, of whatever denominational stripe. Its ecumenical significance cannot be gainsaid, for it canonically authorizes the Church’s liturgical prayer to the deity as Father.

But what are we doing when we call on God as ‘Father’? Given the current debate on theological language and the appropriateness or inappropriateness of masculine language for God, it is important that the status of ‘Father’ as a form of address to the deity be clearly understood. Is it metaphor, literal speech, or perhaps something else? An accurate answer to this question is necessary to any discussion of the significance of Father-language within the discourse and prayer of the Church.

In this paper we demonstrate that the divine title ‘Father’ is a vocative and designating term that functions like a proper name in its unique referentiality. It consequently possesses privileged and foundational status within Christian discourse.

Description of Vocative Case and its Use

Vocative most often refers to a grammatical case marking a noun by a change in morphology and is used to denote one or more persons or things to whom the sentence is directed. English, like most of the modern members of the Indo-European language family, has lost its morphologically marked vocative but has retained syntactically the force of the case. It is marked entirely by syntactic changes and characterized phonetically.

The purpose of vocative address is to capture the attention of the addressee—a “call” (as in [1] below)—or, less forcefully, to express the speaker’s



relationship to the addressee—sometimes designated an “address” (as in [2] below). These two functions may coincide in a given utterance and therefore are not to be construed as mutually exclusive.

- (1) O LORD, open thou our lips. (*Book of Common Prayer*, 42)
- (2) Naomi her mother-in-law said to her, “MY DAUGHTER, I need to seek some security for you, so that it may be well with you.” (Ruth 3:1)

The vocative is set off visually in the clause by means of commas and paralinguistically modulated by a distinctive intonation pattern as a separate tone unit or as the tail, with a falling-rising intonation for an initial call vocative and a rising intonation for a vocative functioning as an address, both being characteristic of English. Other modulations may indicate astonishment, warning, annoyance, etc. Vocatives may appear in a sentence in initial, medial, or final position.

The expressions (words, phrases) used vocatively in English are, beginning with the most frequent:

- (1) Proper names of all sorts: Simon Peter, Mary, James, Judas, Deborah, Yahweh.
- (2) Titles of occupation, status, and respect: Rabbi, Bishop, Professor, Doctor, Waiter, Sir, Miss, Madam.
- (3) Kinship terms designating family relationships: Dad, Mom; Son, Daughter; diminutives, such as Daddy, Mommy.
- (4) Favorable and unfavorable epithets: friend, beloved, my love, fool, liar, hypocrite.
- (5) General nouns: man, ye Pharisees, children of God, you stupid table (speaker barked his shins on it).¹

Note the overall *syntactic equality* of these vocative expressions, i.e., titles = kinship terms = proper names.

Reference and Proper Names

John Lyons, in his important work *Semantics*, makes clear that one of the fundamental semantic functions of words is the naming process.² Names of all sorts—but here we are thinking primarily of appellations—can be used both referentially³ (to assert something about somebody or something) and vocatively (in all the ways mentioned above). A proper name uniquely and rigidly designates a specific individual existent and is therefore to be distinguished from common nouns, which denominate specific classes of objects. Proper names are also to be distinguished from definite descriptions (singular noun phrases beginning with the definite article, e.g., “the daughter of Pharaoh”), which denote whoever or whatever fits the description. Proper names are sometimes called rigid designators; definite descriptions flaccid designators.⁴ In English proper names are commonly capitalized and are used without determiners (i.e., definite and indefinite articles, demonstrative adjectives, etc.).

Just as there are immediately recognizable differences between proper names and common nouns, there is a different relation between a name and its bearer and between a common noun and that which the noun denotes. There is a long-standing theory of meaning in which one distinguishes between 'Fido': Fido, on the one hand, and 'dog': {Fido, Lassie, Spot, Rex, etc.}, on the other.⁵ That is to say, a dog given the name 'Fido' and addressed by that name is assuredly that dog Fido, whereas 'dog', as a general term, will generate dogs of various names, including other Fidos. But with the name 'Fido' we convey nothing more about the animal than his name. Because proper names have no meaning apart from their referents, they enjoy a fundamental arbitrariness. Proper names exclusively denote, whereas nouns and descriptive phrases both denote and signify.⁶

This is not to deny that names may also carry connotative, emotive, and associative meanings. Within a specific family, for example, the name 'Fido' may well bring to mind a whole host of feelings and attitudes (good or bad) because of the prior experience of the family with a specific canine named Fido. Consequently, whenever family members hear this name, no matter if disconnected to the dog in question, these feelings and attitudes may be called forth. Similarly, identifying descriptions will in most cases accompany the use of a proper name, such that when a speaker is asked about the bearer of a proper name ("Which dog is Fido?"), he or she will respond with one or more descriptions. These descriptions, however, do not fix the reference of the name, unless the speaker deliberately employs them to do so.⁷

We recall that 'Fido' refers uniquely to a specific dog by that name. But there are of course other dogs named Fido. Here it is helpful to clarify our reflection by the distinction between tokens and types.⁸ The word 'Fido' may be construed as an abstract reality, a type, that we can neither see nor hear. The written and verbal instantiations of the type 'Fido' are known as tokens. The distinction that is being made here is analogous to the distinction made on other linguistic levels, for example, between phoneme/allophone and morpheme/allomorph, where the second item of each pair is the realization or concrete example of the general and abstract phenomenon. When we state that 'Fido' refers uniquely and rigidly to a specific dog, we are speaking of 'Fido' as token and not as type. Why does a given token 'Fido' denote the specific dog Fido and not all other Fidos? Because *this* dog has been historically named 'Fido' and *this* token has been accepted, communicated, and passed down by the surrounding community. Michael Devitt calls this causal network a "designating chain" (d-chain): proper names are grounded in their objects through dubbing, usage, and reference borrowing.⁹ For example, Jesus was formally given the Hebrew name *Yeshua* or *Yehoshua* (Gk. *Iesous*, Lat. *Iesus*, Eng. *Jesus*) at his circumcision. This ceremony was witnessed by family and friends, who then passed on this name and its denotation to others, who themselves then gained both the ability to refer successfully to the son of

Mary and Joseph by the name 'Jesus' and the ability to "lend" to others the successful referential use of this word—so on and so on, down to the present. This causal network forms a d-chain that connects the user of the token 'Jesus' to the historical person Jesus, thus making possible effective designation.

Once given and established, proper names refer independently of all descriptive aptness, though they may in fact enjoy such aptness; e.g., Simon bar Jonah was given the Aramaic nickname *Cephas* ("rock": 'Peter' from the Greek and Latin) by Jesus because his faith was like a rock. In fact, a proper name may successfully refer even if the speaker holds descriptive beliefs about the object that are inaccurate or incorrect.¹⁰ For example, even if Peter's faith never was like a rock, even if many of our beliefs about him turn out to be wrong, even if Jesus never actually bestowed upon Simon the name of Peter, the appellation may still be effectively employed to designate the Prince of the Apostles. Reference by personal names is independent of identifying knowledge. What is crucial is the causal linking between name and object.

Proper names, therefore, are unsubstitutable.¹¹ One cannot by induction determine a suitable and successful replacement for a given proper name; proper names have no synonyms. The present authors' names, for example, are Donald and Alvin, bestowed upon us by our parents. By these names (or by their diminutives, 'Don' and 'Al') we have been known all our lives; they denote us in our individual, personal existence. Whatever may have been the original reasons our parents chose these names for us, they now possess an arbitrary and given status. They simply *are* our names, and if a person wants to successfully address us, he or she had best get them right; it is unlikely we will respond to 'Bob', 'Benny', 'Harry', or 'Sam'.

Of course, it is possible to give a new name or nickname to an individual but usually only with the consent of the individual and the surrounding linguistic community. It is also possible for an individual to choose a new name for himself. In either case, the new name functions not as a translational substitute for the earlier proper name but rather as an addition to it or replacement for it.

Titles and Unique Reference

We are all familiar with titles, though different cultures rely on the regular use of a wider variety than other cultures. Frequent titles include titles of occupation and status (Bishop, Professor, Doctor, Father [priest], etc.), as well as titles of privilege, attainment, and respect (Mr., Mrs., General, your Honor, Countess, etc.). We may define a title as follows: a title is a formal descriptive term given to a person or being setting him or her apart in some distinctive way. It may be used either as a noun phrase in the third person or as a vocative.

Titles are different from proper names in several important respects. For one thing, the mere mention of any of the vocational titles above will call forth immediately a fairly clear idea of the work done by persons holding these designations. In short, titles contain *descriptive content*—though this

content can be minimal indeed (e.g., titles of privilege or respect)—whereas we have earlier indicated that proper names carry only *referential meaning*.

Titles do, however, share one important feature with proper names: they can be employed to designate and refer to a specific individual.¹² In English, titles are routinely joined with names: Bishop Temple, Dr. Livingston, Senator Kennedy, etc. But when a title is used alone, its referent is usually obvious, no matter whether the name has been mentioned earlier, the name is unknown, or the use of the title is playful. In the sentence "The President withdrew his nominee for the Supreme Court," the word 'President' unequivocally refers (given the proper context) to the individual who resides at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. As isolated lexemes the denotation of titles may be open, but when spoken in a given context they will often refer exclusively and unambiguously to a definite person. Examples of such uniquely referring titles are 'Chairman', 'King', 'Queen', 'Pope', 'Messiah'. Note that, like proper names, these titles are capitalized in English. Referring titles constitute a class that, in the words of John Searle, "shades off into definite descriptions at one end and proper names at the other."¹³

Like proper names, uniquely referring titles are typically connected to their bearers by designating chains. The d-chain assures us of the title's referential validity, as well as its acceptability to the one so titled. At his inauguration Bill Clinton was formally installed as the President of the United States, an event witnessed by millions and legally authenticated. From that point on, he assumed the title of 'President' and is now addressed as 'Mr. President'. We may successfully use these titles to refer to the husband of Hillary because both we and the titles are connected to him through a causal network of reference. 'The President' and 'Mr. President' refer to him uniquely and rigidly. While the original conferral of a title ordinarily involves initiation into a new role—descriptive elements, in other words, may (and probably do) ground the initial naming—the *subsequent* designational use of the title does not require an identifying knowledge of the role. It does not require that the title-bearer uniquely fulfill, in the mind of the speaker, one or more defining characteristics. All that is necessary is that the succeeding speakers enter into the community of reference-borrowing. "Where both descriptivist and direct reference are available," William Alston writes, "and even where they are both employed, it is direct reference that determines the referent."¹⁴

We are not denying that speakers may fix titular reference by descriptivist means—in a given utterance explicit descriptive backing may be in the speaker's mind—nor are we denying that if a speaker is asked, Why do you call Bill Clinton "Mr. President?" he or she will probably respond with a list of descriptions: Clinton won the November election, he was publicly inaugurated in January, he delivered the 1993 State of the Union address, he lives in the White House, and so forth. But we are asserting that this knowledge is unnecessary for reference. Perhaps a person slept through the election and has no idea what a President of the United States does. He or she will still

be able to refer to Bill Clinton by the title 'President' and will still be able to engage him in conversation with its vocative form. Confirmation of the sufficiency of designating chains for titular reference is provided by the fact that, once established, a title can successfully designate its designatum even if it is inaccurate or conveys no actual attributive content. Consider, for instance, a confidence man who passes himself off to a community as a physician and is accorded the title 'Dr. Smith'. The title will refer, even though the definite description of medical doctor is incorrect. The coincidence of title and description is usual but not referentially necessary.

Are uniquely referring titles, like proper names, unsubstitutable? At first glance they would appear not to be. Conveying descriptive content, they are potentially replaceable by synonyms, and as we have seen, titular reference may in fact be secured descriptively in specific instances. But the matter is not as simple as this. Once connected to their bearers by designating chains, referring titles cease to be common nouns designating classes of objects and become something like proper names. They have grown capital letters, as P. F. Strawson pithily puts it.¹⁵ Speakers can, of course, successfully replace uniquely referring titles, but more than the substitution of words is involved: one either plugs into the extant referential path or one creates a new path. Consider the example of a reporter who at a press conference addresses Bill Clinton as "Mr. Highest Officer" (the thesaurus listing 'highest officer' as a synonym for 'president'). In doing so, the reporter is "baptizing" the phrase and generating a new d-chain. The individual is free to do so, just as Mr. Clinton is free to acknowledge or not to acknowledge this form of address. The descriptive content of the new title is not irrelevant. Its synonymy will influence, if not determine, both its original choice and its acceptance by the community of speakers; but because of the title's semantic grounding in its bearer through the act of historical designation, subsequent speakers may now employ it to refer to its bearer independent of its cognitive meaning, as long as they intend to refer to the same object as those from whom they learned it. The institution of a synonymous title is therefore analogous to the bestowal of a new name upon an individual.

Titles and Kinship Terms

One of the most important categories of titles is that of kinship terms. There are thirteen basic kinship words in English, and some accompanying diminutives: father, mother, son, daughter, brother, sister, uncle, aunt, nephew, niece, cousin, husband, wife, plus some modifying affixes and terms such as great-, grand-, step, half-, -in-law, first, second, third. These terms specify familial relationships between persons. Of these, only 'father', 'mother', 'uncle, aunt', and (regionally) 'cousin', and their diminutives, are normally used vocatively alone or in conjunction with a proper name, and it is rare that any but 'father' and 'mother' are used with frequency.

Countless examples show that kinship terms can behave like proper nouns, as evidenced by the absence of determiners and the capitalization of the first letter: "Where's Dad?" "Is Mother coming?" "I expect Uncle Bob to join us Sunday afternoon." This behavior is further confirmed by vocative use: "Mom, are you coming with me today?" "You didn't tell me about that, Father." In these examples the familial title expressly identifies and tags either the person spoken about or the hearer. These terms have in fact *become* uniquely referring titles. Kinship terms, therefore, may be considered as titles under proper third-person conditions and always when used in the vocative form.

When employed vocatively, kinship terms are spoken from *within* the familial relationship and thus tell us something about both the one speaking and the one to whom the communication is directed. "Mom, will you pick me up after school today?" From this utterance we know simultaneously that the one addressed exists in a maternal relationship with the speaker and that the speaker exists in a filial relationship with the addressee. In this respect kinship terms differ from proper names, which ordinarily have no descriptive or relational content. Kinship terms of address both denote and signify.

Most kinship terms in English are overtly marked for either masculine or feminine gender. Gender refers to two or more subcategories within a grammatical form class (e.g., noun, pronoun, adjective) of a given language, and requiring agreement with other words. Gender is to be clearly distinguished from sex (though there is often a relationship between the two).¹⁶ Modern English employs natural or notional gender: nouns and pronouns, but not adjectives or verbs, are classified according to semantic distinctions, in particular, sexual distinctions. The gender of the word (masculine, feminine, or neuter) is generally determined by the sex, or lack of sex, of its referent. For most nouns gender is covert: the gender of the word is hidden until the referent is known. For example, in the sentence "The teacher lectured brilliantly on the bankruptcy of liberal Protestantism" the gender of 'teacher' is either masculine or feminine, depending on the sex of the teacher. Overt gender, on the other hand, occurs in the third-person singular pronouns and in words marked for specific gender—including kinship terms such as 'father', 'mother', 'aunt', 'uncle'. The correlation between the sex of the individual and the gender of the kinship term is direct and usual.

Designating kinship terms, like uniquely referring titles, are typically connected to their bearers by causal designating chains. They successfully designate the appropriate individuals because they can be historically traced (at least theoretically) through a process of naming back to their designata. This is especially apparent in the vocative use of kinship terms. When does the title 'Mom' become a successful vocative and referring title within a given family? Is it not when the child (natural or adopted) begins to call upon his or her mother by this name?

“Father” as Uniquely Referring Divine Title

‘Father’ is a term of kinship and familial relationship. The title describes a male animal in specific generative and/or parental relationship to a child or offspring. This is its customary, primary, and typical use—its literal use.¹⁷ When we speak literally, we mean what our words say. Linguistic meaning and speaker meaning coincide.¹⁸ Consider, for example, the literal use of predicates in subject-predicate statement: “The man standing over there in the corner is my father.” A property or relation conventionally signified by the term ‘father’ is attributed directly to the referent. Succinctly stated, literal speech is accustomed speech.¹⁹

‘Father’ may also be used metaphorically in any number of ways. As a mode of speech, metaphor involves the transference of a word or expression from its typical context to a different context.²⁰ Linguistic meaning and speaker meaning thus diverge. We do not mean precisely what our words say; we mean both more and less. Metaphor invites the hearer to envisage its subject (tenor) in light of one or more conventional meanings (vehicle). It proposes an exemplar or model through which the subject might be rendered and its significant features understood. Metaphorical speech therefore retains the linguistic meaning(s) of a word. It is not the sense of the expression that changes but its referent. “Metaphor,” explains Janet Martin Soskice, “is that figure of speech whereby we speak about one thing in terms which are seen to be suggestive of another.”²¹

When God is identified as Father, the model of fatherhood is proposed as a paradigm by which deity is to be interpreted. Because the mode of presentation is metaphorical, such usage commits one to saying that God both is like and is not like a human father in specific ways. This “similarity” and “difference” is rhetorical and ontological: it is rhetorical, for a transfer of meaning is involved in the communication event; it is ontological, for the difference between uncreated and created reality is absolute, yet God condescends in his mercy to identify himself by creaturely realities. By this metaphorical presentation biological sex and cultural stereotyping may be excluded from our understanding of deity.

Some theorists prefer to call this use of ‘Father’ analogy rather than metaphor. They note the regularity and centrality of the title within the Christian tradition and suggest that the elements of surprise and dissonance, so characteristic of metaphor, are absent in the churchly use of ‘Father’. Metaphor and analogy, however, share a basic linguistic structure: both submit an exemplar or model through and by which the underlying subject is to be known. Both direct the attention of the hearer to an imaginative paradigm.²² For purpose of this essay, therefore, metaphor and analogy will be treated as identical modes of speech.

Throughout the New Testament and Christian tradition, ‘Father’ is commonly used to speak to and about the Creator. This usage undoubtedly origi-

nates in the practice of Jesus and his Apostles, and has been passed on to succeeding generations of believers. Given the grounding of the Church's prayer and discourse in the historical converse between Jesus and the One he named Father, the vocative use of 'Father' must be deemed as foundational for all descriptive uses. Because Jesus, and we in him by the Spirit, address the deity as Father, we may in the third person speak about him as Father. Our knowledge of the trinitarian converse, however, is itself grounded in the biblical narrative about the triune God. The *lex orandi, lex credendi* runs both ways.

'Father' specifically identifies and names the God of Jesus Christ. Like a proper name 'Father' denotes the referent in an exclusive manner; like a proper name it is capitalized and used without determiners; like a proper name it is historically given; like a proper name it is connected to its bearer by a causal network of reference. And as with all proper names, its vocative use assumes that the hearer, who in this case is God, will acknowledge the name as referring to himself; otherwise the communication will be unsuccessful.

Those who wish to raise the objection that 'Father' is a title with primary denotative meaning referring to a male parent in Western and other societies (with various stereotypical associations of age, authority, care-giving), and therefore not a proper name, fail to recognize the basic sameness of modality when a noun phrase is used with designational intent. When 'Father', for instance, is spoken by Christians in the second person to address the deity, it is *both* a title and a name. Or perhaps more precisely, 'Father' is neither a personal name in a conventional sense, such as 'Mary', 'Joseph', or 'Jesus', nor a typical title in terms of occupation or rank; *but it functions as both*. The equation might be stated as designation qua name qua title—succinctly, a titular name.

There are two notable differences between the divine title 'Father' and ordinary proper names:

(1) 'Father' confers descriptive content, which is why the word is always translated rather than transliterated from language to language as the gospel moves into new cultures. When either Jesus or the Church describes God as Father, something about God is being stated—though always in a metaphorical manner. This content, however, is ultimately determined by Christ in his life, death, and resurrection and not, finally, by ordinary experience of sinful human fatherhood. We do not first know God as fatherlike and then decide to call him Father. We begin with the historical naming, with Jesus' invocation of God as Father, and then inquire as to its meaning. This feature of the Father-title distinguishes it from other uniquely referring titles and brings it closer to the proper name side of the spectrum. Even if we do not know what 'Father' means when we say the Lord's Prayer or when we refer to the first person of the Trinity, or even if what we think we know is wrong, we still exercise effective reference because our usage is causally grounded in the practice of Jesus and the apostolic Church.

The designational function of the divine title is logically prior to—and semantically independent of—its descriptive function. Strawson distinguishes between referring and ascriptive expressions.²³ A referring expression fixes the reference to a specific someone or something; an ascriptive expression tells us about someone or something. Adapting Strawson's distinction, we may say that within Christian discourse the divine title of 'Father' is both a referring and ascriptive expression, but its direct referential use is ultimately independent of all descriptive purposes. In the case of human relationships the relational content of kinship terms reinforces their usage. A small child, for example, may learn the use of a parental title long before understanding the relationship; but the eventual comprehension of the relationship will in turn augment and undergird the appropriate use of the title.²⁴ In the case of divinity and the churchly use of 'Father', on the other hand, the authority of Christ operates in a decisive and unilateral manner: we name God 'Father' because, and only because, we are instructed to do so by the second person of the Holy Trinity.

(2) The vocative use of 'Father' implicates the speaker in a filial relationship with God. Jesus rightly names God 'Father' because he is himself the only-begotten Son (John 1:18); the baptized dare to call upon God as Father because in Christ we have been adopted as his children by the Holy Spirit (Gal. 4:4-7). The personal employment of this language has a commissive, self-involving quality. To call on God as Father is to accept the blessings and responsibilities of being his children, as well as to acknowledge God's personal and gracious identity *for us* in Jesus Christ. The use of ordinary proper names does not normally involve the speaker in active, personal commitment.

Given the designational and relational functions of 'Father', we contend that the title enjoys a privileged status within Christian discourse. It shares in the linguistic arbitrariness and givenness that all proper names enjoy. It rigidly denotes the God of Jesus Christ, and through the invocation of this name, the baptized enact their status as sons and daughters of God. Hence all proposals to abolish the practice of invoking God as Father are refuted. This holds even if 'Father', when applied to the deity, is metaphorical or analogical usage. It is quite appropriate to assert that the Church's paternal language for God is figurative, while simultaneously insisting on the unique referentiality of the divine title 'Father'.

All deities are invoked by names, even if that name is only the name *God*. If 'Father' rightly denotes the God of Jesus, the intentional choice to evade this name suggests linguistically either that the object of worship is in fact different from the God normally worshipped by Christians or that the worshipers have rejected their status as sons and daughters of God.

Wolfhart Pannenberg has recently stated the first point in terms of the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. All of our language for God is inadequate to the

divine mystery, so it is appropriate that our symbolic and metaphorical language be abundant and full. This language is external to deity and therefore exchangeable. Such is not the case, however, with the appellation 'Father', says Pannenberg. 'Father' was Jesus' only name for God, and because this proper naming occurs within the triune being of the Godhead, it enjoys eschatological finality. "Where the word 'Father' is replaced by something else," he concludes, "there can be no warrant anymore that we are talking about and addressing the same God as Jesus did."²⁵

The latter point is illustrated by an episode of the television show "Family Ties." The episode was devoted to Nick, the boyfriend of Malorie. He had been alienated from his father for many years, and his distance and anger were symbolized in his refusal to call his father 'Dad'. He insisted instead on calling him by his first name. At the end of the episode, father and son are finally reconciled, and for the first time in years the vocative 'Dad' crosses Nick's lips as he joyfully reclaims his filial status. Kinship terms of address are spoken from within the familial relationship and indeed characterize that relationship. Such language is usually avoided only when an individual has moved outside the affection and bonds of family. Those who have been adopted in baptism as children of God will rejoice in their filial relationship, and will rejoice even more so in the unspeakable privilege of naming the Creator of the universe "Abba, Father."

"Mother" as Substitute for "Father"

What about the possibility either of substituting 'Mother' for 'Father' or of alternating 'Mother' with 'Father'? Three objections may be raised on the basis of our theolinguistic analysis.

First, 'Father', as we have seen, is causally connected to God through the historical person of Jesus Christ. It is a uniquely referring title related to divinity by the designating chain of dominical and apostolic practice. The Church has insisted emphatically that this naming is grounded in divine revelation and that the first person of the Trinity appropriately accepts this name as referring to himself. The designating chain moves not only from the present to a past revelation but also into the future. The Apostle Paul provides the two key biblical texts:

When we cry, "Abba! Father!" it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God. (Rom 8:15-16)

And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying "Abba! Father!" (Gal 4:6)

The Church's address of the deity as Father is grounded in the speech of the kingdom; the Spirit-filled assembly utters the invocation of the risen Christ. The referential competence of this discourse issues from an eschatological cord of nomination, a cord that begins in Bethlehem and ends in the Heavenly Banquet.

If we wish to invoke God or refer to him successfully, we rightly return to the ecclesial d-chain. It is the historical community of the Church that equips us to name God truly. New appellations for God can of course be created; but the question of warrant then becomes paramount. As Jerome Gellman has written, "For reference to be successful there really must *be* a path leading back to the object. It's not enough for the namer to believe there is."²⁶

Theoretically, the title 'Mother' could be substituted for 'Father', either by tying into the current Father-chain or by instituting a new referential path. The following questions would still have to be answered satisfactorily before the Church could authorize either option. Do we *know* that God accepts 'Mother' as a vocative substitute for 'Father'? If it is advanced that God is now inviting prayer to him/her as Mother, this claim would appear to require a new revelation for its justification, a revelation that would ground the new naming and from which would flow subsequent designation. If so, when, where and to whom did such revelation occur? Is such revelation probable in light of the eschatological finality of 'Father'? Considerations regarding content also appear at this point. Are the terms synonymous? If they are not (as we argue below), then judgment must be made as to their theological compatibility.

Second, 'Mother' and 'Father' are mutually exclusive terms. They are *overtly marked* for feminine and masculine gender, respectively, and therefore should not be used in modern English to name the same object. To do so is to disrupt gender concord and confuse the hearer. The fact that, applied to the deity, the use of 'Mother' and 'Father' must be metaphorical in some sense—the Christian God is, after all, sexually transcendent—does not alter this more basic grammatical point: if "Father" properly designates the deity, then 'Mother' cannot logically do so—and vice versa.

The gender opposition of the parental titles is grounded in their semantic unequivallence. Sexual duality and contrasting generative roles clearly establish their distinct signification. Neither can function as the other's synonymous substitute. As designating titles, 'Mother' and 'Father' always literally identify two separate individuals, female and male respectively. They are perhaps best described as antonyms. Antonyms are words that share one aspect of meaning but are opposite in another aspect of meaning. Theoretically, the frequency, distribution, and sense of a word never coincide to produce a genuine synonym, yet words can certainly share some aspect of meaning and be antonymic in another aspect; for example, 'little': 'big' and 'small': 'large' share size but not degree or distribution. Antonyms fall generally into two categories—gradable and ungradable. Gradable antonyms may be considered as forming a spectrum. For example, 'hot' and 'cold' would specify the extremities of the hypernym 'temperature', with 'warm'—'lukewarm'—'cool' in between.²⁷ Ungradable antonyms eschew a

gradable spectrum, identifying their referents as belonging to one of two mutually exclusive but complementary subsets, e.g., 'male': 'female', 'alive': 'dead', 'mother': 'father'. One important implication of ungradable antonymy is noted by Lyons: "The predication of either one of the pair implies the predication of the negation of the other."²⁸ If a person is a mother, then she is not and cannot be a father; if a person is a father, then he is not and cannot be a mother.²⁹

One objection may be raised: Since the Christian use of 'Father' is figurative, will not the antonymy of 'Mother' and 'Father' be overcome by the metaphorical extension of 'Mother' into religious discourse? Can we not, in this manner, drain the two words of their specific creaturely-biological content and thus render them semantically equivalent and gender-neutralized? This objection, however, misconstrues figurative usage. Metaphor does not obliterate the conventional meaning of a word; it transfers the word to an unusual context, thereby resulting in the creative interanimation of ideas and the disclosure of the subject in a new light. Even when used metaphorically, 'Mother' and 'Father' remain descriptively incompatible and antonymous.

It is certainly true that metaphors can become ossified over time, achieving the status of dead metaphors. When this happens, we see a movement from metaphorical usage to literal usage. A new word is in fact created. Thus appeal is no longer made to a comparative model; now the word may be used literally in its own dictionary meaning. This is not, however, how 'Father' functions within Christian discourse. Even when the divine title is described by theologians as a form of literal or proper speech, the analogical structure is retained in the invocation of the fatherhood model to describe divinity.³⁰ We would expect 'Mother' to function similarly in metaphorical extension. This is particularly the case given the dichotomous opposition of 'Father' and 'Mother'. If one of a pair of antonyms undergoes semantic change, the other will most likely undergo a parallel change.³¹ 'Hot' and 'cold', for instance, are antonyms that describe physical temperature. In figurative use this antonymy continues: e.g., *hot news* (breaking news) versus *cold news* (old news). The structure of the semantic field plays an important role in semantic extension and change. The claim, therefore, that 'Mother' and 'Father' may be rendered descriptively identical must be rejected as implausible. The relation of antonymy is not so easily overcome. As Lyons observes, "[B]inary opposition is one of the most important principles governing the structure of languages."³²

Here we must advance a distinction between predicating and designating metaphors. Predicating metaphors are those typically presented in subject-predicate form—for example, "God is my mother." Designating metaphors are those employed as uniquely referring titles—for example, "Father, send down your Spirit." As predicating metaphors, there is no linguistic reason why 'mother' (and related maternal imagery) could not complement 'father' (and related paternal imagery) in our modeling of deity. Because, however,

of their lexical antonymy and gender opposition, both should not be used as titular names for the one God. To designate the deity—even metaphorically—by both titles would inevitably introduce confusions of reference. This is particularly true in a religion like Christianity, where ‘Father’ already functions like a proper name for the God of Jesus Christ.

Third, the feminine gender of ‘Mother’ disagrees both with the grammatical gender of the biblical deity and with the gender of the English word ‘God’.³³ The development of these two points is beyond the range of this paper. Succinctly, the argument proceeds as follows: Within the narrative presentation of the Holy Scriptures, divinity is assigned masculine grammatical gender (as opposed to sex), which governs the choice of names, titles, and pronouns for God. This narrative portrayal has so profoundly shaped English speech that the word ‘God’ has retained masculine gender (cf. ‘Goddess’). When a story is told in English, it is necessary to assign a specific gender to each character; consequently, when the story of the God of Israel and Church is told, his gender is inevitably masculine, as evidenced by all scholarly English translations of the Scriptures. This narrative telling is constitutive for the worship and discourse of the Church and our theological identification of deity.

While the grammatical gender of the biblical God does not inhibit the use of feminine metaphors and similes to describe his care and discipline of humanity, it does determine the choice of titles and kinship terms by which to designate him. The notional gender of modern English requires that the gender of vocative titles agree with the gender of their referent. We may speak figuratively of God as an eagle nurturing her young or as a mother-bear protecting her cubs; but we will *name* him ‘Father’, not ‘Mother’. Our speech must be faithful both to the grammar of the biblical narrative and the grammar of the language in which we proclaim this narrative.

Conclusion

Throughout the debate of the past twenty years regarding the role and function of ‘Father’ in the Church’s language for God, a crucial distinction has been overlooked: ‘Father’ is a designating title that functions like a proper name, both in vocative address and direct reference. Grounded in the practice of Jesus and the historic Church, it uniquely identifies the God of Israel. It therefore possesses privileged and foundational status within Christian discourse and is not easily replaced. As the Church continues to wrestle with the difficult questions of sexism and theological language, she must recognize that she has received a precious gift in the life and witness of Jesus Christ, a gift she may neither squander nor toss aside.

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NOTES

1. Randolph Quirk, Sidney Greenbaum, Geoffrey Leech, Jan Svartik, *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language* (New York: Longman, 1985), 773-774; Leslie Dunkling, *A Dictionary of Epithets and Terms of Address* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

2. John Lyons, *Semantics*, vol. I (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 215-216.

3. Reference denotes the relationship between an expression and that reality for which it stands (i.e., its referent). Accurately speaking, words do not refer; speakers refer by the use of words.

4. Robert M. Martin, *The Meaning of Language* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988), 164-169.

5. Lyons, 216.

6. Gilbert Ryle, "The Theory of Meaning," *Collected Works*, vol. II (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1971), 357.

7. William P. Alston, "Referring to God," *Divine Nature and Human Language* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 112-113.

8. See Christopher Hutton, *Abstraction and Instance: The Type-Token Relation in Linguistic Theory* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1990), 1-4, 38.

9. Michael Devitt, *Designation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), 26-32, 129-138.

10. See Saul Kripke's decisive critique of description theories of proper names: *Naming and Necessity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980). For Kripkean analyses of reference and divinity, see William P. Alston, "Referring to God," 103-117; and Jerome I. Gellman, "Naming, and Naming God," *Religious Studies*, 29 (1993): 192-216.

11. A word is substitutable for another if they are descriptively equivalent, i.e., "if there is nothing that is entailed by the one that is not entailed by the other" (Lyons, 202).

12. Cf. Kent Bach, *Thought and Reference* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 33. Bach speaks of "descriptive names," descriptions that have become proper names (e.g., "the Sultan of Swat," a name of Babe Ruth).

13. Quoted in Lyons, 181.

14. Alston, 110. Alston asserts that direct reference is the primary mode of reference, occurring "without the need for any deliberate intervention" on the part of the subject (112).

15. P. F. Strawson, "On Referring," *Mind* 59 (1950): 338, 341.

16. See Greville Corbett, *Gender* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

17. On literal usage, see William P. Alston, "Irreducible Metaphors in Theology," *Divine Nature and Human Language*, 20-25; and Janet Martin Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 67-71. Confusion on the nature of literal speech critically flaws the analysis of Sallie McFague: see, e.g., *Metaphorical Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982).

18. We are aware that the distinction made here, though commonplace and standard, is debated; but space prevents us from detailing even major differences of viewpoint. See Michael Devitt and Kim Sterelny, *Language and Reality* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987), 120-128.

19. Soskice, 69.

20. On metaphorical usage, see Soskice, esp. chaps. 2-5; John R. Searle, "Metaphor," in *The Philosophy of Language*, 2nd ed., ed. A. P. Martinich (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 408-429; William P. Alston, "Irreducible Metaphors," 17-38. Though we focus in this paper on individual terms and expressions, we recognize that metaphor obtains at the level of complete utterance.

21. Soskice, 15.

22. On the analogical structure of metaphor, see Garrett Green, *Imagining God* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989), esp. 130-134.

23. Strawson, 335-341.

24. William P. Alston, letter to Alvin Kimel, 26 June 1993.

25. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 31-33.

26. Gellman, 203.

27. See Adrian Akmajian et al., *Linguistics: An Introduction to Language and Communication*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), 205.

28. Lyons, 271-272.

29. Note, however, that constructing a spectrum with 'father' and 'mother' at opposite ends creates the concept of 'parent' at the midpoint as the shared aspect of meaning. This is important from the feminist point of view. If we conceive of God as "mother *and* father," we necessarily employ the underlying adjectival forms of "motherly" and "fatherly" on a continuum. But from the standpoint of uniquely referring titles, 'mother' and 'father' remain ungradably opposed. It is more important to recognize the essential form class of noun, or substantive, rather than to treat a subsurface feature of meaning as if it comprised merely a comparison of two gradable adjectives in opposition. There is a clear difference between naming God 'Father' and describing his activity in paternal terms.

30. See, e.g., J. A. DiNoia, "Knowing and Naming the Triune God," in *Speaking the Christian God*, ed. Alvin F. Kimel, Jr. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 162-187.

31. Akmajian, 292. Adrienne Lehrer states the rule thus: "[W]hen one word in a lexical field has been transferred to a new field, the other words in the field are available for extension to that new field by virtue of their association with the first word. The words will retain the same relationship to one another in the new field as they did in old fields: antonyms will remain antonyms, synonyms will remain synonyms, etc." *Semantic Fields and Lexical Structure* (Amsterdam: North Holland, 1974), 112.

32. Lyons, 271.

33. On both of these points, see Donald D. Hook and Alvin F. Kimel, Jr., "The Pronouns of Deity: A Theolinguistic Critique of Feminist Proposals," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 46/3 (1993): 297-323.