

Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

Volume 15 | Issue 2

Article 10

4-1-1998

Reply to Isham

William Harper

Follow this and additional works at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy>

Recommended Citation

Harper, William (1998) "Reply to Isham," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 15 : Iss. 2 , Article 10.

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol15/iss2/10>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers by an authorized editor of ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange.

REPLY TO ISHAM

William Harper

In "On Calling God 'Mother'" (this journal), I argued that the practice of referring to God exclusively in male terms is morally acceptable. Isham claims that I have argued that "God should be referred to exclusively in male terms." He claims that the Bible refers to God in female terms. He hints that I may have engaged in "gender devaluation." He claims that there is a "need for a deity with which women can both relate and identify." The first of Isham's claims is simply false. I address the remaining criticisms at greater length.

In his discussion paper "Is God Exclusively a Father?", George F. Isham offers several criticisms of my paper "On Calling God 'Mother'."¹ The main point Isham argues for is that the claim "God should be referred to exclusively in male terms" does not follow from the various reasons I offer. This is not surprising, since I do not make that claim, and the reasons offered are not intended to support it. The claim I make is that there are no compelling reasons for Christians in general to refer to God in female terms. The claim was made in response to an article by Patricia Altenbernd Johnson, who argues that God ought be referred to in female terms.² Johnson does not argue that female terms should be used exclusively, and I have not argued that it is improper to use female terms. Rather, I offer a defense of those Christians who choose to refer to God exclusively in male terms.

Isham offers certain criticisms with which I agree. Isham points out that my blanket rejection of immanence is incorrect, conflicting with not so minor a point as the Incarnation. My focus was Sallie McFague's advocacy of pantheistic immanence, which I reject. I should have stated my rejection more precisely. Also, I mention a human-interest view of harm to the Earth in order to make the point that giving the Earth interests requires inspiring the Earth. Isham writes that "[A] moderate position would view nature as possessing a secondary, derived value, as opposed to absolute or little worth. Thus, the basis for an ecological ethics is not simply human self-interest, but also the value that God originally conferred on creation (Ro. 1:20)" (270). I did not intend to suggest that instrumental value to humans is the only source of value for the Creation, only that the Earth is not a conscious entity with its own interests.

Isham cites several Bible verses that use feminine similes and



metaphors, or that personify wisdom as a woman. He writes that “although Harper might prove that the Bible depicts God *predominately* with male attributes, he cannot demonstrate that the Scriptures refer to God *exclusively* in masculine terms” (269). Actually, I may be able to do both, depending on what theory of metaphor turns out to be true. In similes, the terms in the predicate do not refer to the subject of the sentence. No identity is suggested or entailed. When Jesus says that he wants to gather the people of Jerusalem together “as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings” (Mt. 23.37), the simile does not suggest that Jesus is a woman any more than it suggests that Jesus is a chicken. Rather, it expresses Jesus’s desire to extend to the people of Jerusalem the kind of gentle protectiveness exemplified by a female chicken toward her chicks.

The interpretation of metaphor is more controversial. The simplest and, to me, most convincing theory of metaphor is the so-called “elliptical view,” which takes metaphors to be simply elliptical similes. If metaphors reduce to similes, then metaphors used to picture God in female terms do not refer to God in female terms. A different theory of metaphor is advanced by Monroe Beardsley, who argues that in metaphors terms lose their literal meaning and take on a metaphorical meaning. He writes: “When a predicate is metaphorically adjoined to a subject, the predicate loses its ordinary extension, because it acquires a new intension—perhaps one that it has in no other context.”³ Thus, under the “metaphorical meaning” theory, the use of female terms in the predicate of a metaphor would entail nothing about the gender of the sentence subject. Donald Davidson has advanced a radical theory whereby metaphors have only their literal meanings and do not reduce to similes. This approach would be cold comfort for Isham, since under Davidson’s theory metaphors are usually false.⁴ Isham requires a theory of metaphor under which the terms in the predicate refer to the sentence subject, retain their literal meanings, and yet result in a literally true statement. (Note that this would have to hold for all of the qualities expressed in the metaphor, not the female attributes exclusively.) I do not think such an approach is defensible, but I will not argue the point here.

Regardless of one’s theory of metaphor, it is pretheoretically obvious that the use of metaphors need not express the gender of the sentence subject. Saying that a certain stalwart person “is a rock” does not entail that one can henceforth properly refer to that person as “it,” even though rocks are neuter. To say of a female soccer player “She is another Pele” is not to imply that she is part male.

The passages Isham cites show that one cannot say without qualification that God revealed Himself exclusively in male terms. However, as far as I know, the only Biblical descriptions of God using female terms are similes or metaphors, so we have been given no examples that indicate one should, or even properly could, refer to God as “She.” This leaves intact my main conclusion, which, again, is not that referring to God in feminine terms is wrong, but that using only male terms to refer to God is not wrong. If anything, the examples Isham cites support the claim that the term “Father” is adequate to be used exclusively to refer to an entity that has qualities that are well expressed in similes and metaphors using femi-

nine terms. That is, referring to God exclusively in male terms does not freeze out those qualities Johnson and others see as feminine and positive.

Isham notes that the Bible uses female terms of reference for the attribute wisdom, and, of course, God is described as having wisdom. However, personifying the virtues as women does not imply that each virtuous person is female, or even part female. We should not conclude that Solomon, because of his wisdom, was part female. Neither need we conclude from the feminine personification of wisdom that a wise God is part female.

Isham is off the mark in suspecting that I engage in gender devaluation (268). In "On Calling God Mother," I claim that the term "father" fully expresses such qualities as preserving love, growth and socialization. Isham wonders whether I assign positive attributes to one gender at the expense of the other (267). However, I never claimed that the qualities of preserving love, growth, and socialization are not fully expressed in the term "mother." I asserted that they are fully expressed in the term "father" against authors who deny that the term "father" expresses such qualities. Isham continues:

A more moderate view would see both fathers and mothers as capable of expressing significant aspects of love, growth, and socialization. Since neither gender can "fully express" such properties, each needs the other for purposes of enhancement and completion. . . . Both men and women have significant parts to play in the "full expression" of positive attributes. (267)

I agree that fathers and mothers compliment each other in child rearing, although the dynamics of that are obscure. However, I think this is beside the point. True, no human father or mother fully exemplifies the properties Isham mentions. The question is whether referring to God in male terms makes it difficult or impossible to see certain positive attributes in God. I argue that it does not; at least it *should* not, any more than the use of female terms should do so.

Isham's claim seems to entail that the use of female terms of reference for God would interfere with the perception of "masculine" qualities in God. I do not believe that is so. Possibly the most stereotypical qualities of human maleness per se are brute strength and aggression, and one can readily find examples of female terms of reference for subjects of remarkable strength and power. A few decades ago referring to nation states in the feminine was common. The United States, economically and militarily the strongest nation in history, would commonly be referred to as "she" without any implication of weakness. Similarly, ocean going liners and battleships received female terms of reference without any loss of perceived strength, power or aggressive possibilities. Such uses of female terms of reference have since come under attack, and I am not here advocating that such use be revived. The examples simply make the point that engendered terms of reference need not interfere with the perception of qualities stereotyped for the other gender. Referring to St. Francis of Assisi as "he" does not detract from his gentleness, and referring to

Beverly Francis as “she” does not detract from her muscular strength.

Isham writes that “Harper’s God [Is Isham suggesting failure of reference?] manifests Himself in such a manner that only one gender (namely, the male) could ever come to some awareness of what its divine likeness entails” (266). Isham claims that there is a “need for a deity with which women can both relate and identify,” and claims that referring to God exclusively in male terms “does not allow women to affirm their gender as being created in the image of God” (270). He quotes Carol P. Christ as saying:

A woman . . . can never have the experience that is freely available to every man and boy in her culture, of having her full sexual identity affirmed in the image and likeness of God. (267)

Isham then claims:

If Christ is correct, Harper’s God effectively disenfranchises half of the human race from certain aspects of religious experience. (267)

I am not in a position to say what individual women do or do not need on this score. I have noted that significant numbers of women seem not to be impeded in their worship by referring to God in male terms.⁵ I can, however, address Christ’s claim that men and boys have their “full sexual identity affirmed in the image and likeness of God.” Sex is an important part of our identity in this world, but male sexuality involves many dimensions that I do not think are affirmed at all in the “image and likeness” of God. It is true that God incarnated Himself as, by all reports, a male, but I do not see how that alone fully affirms male sexual identity. Sex is not prominently exemplified in the life of Jesus. We have no record of Jesus dating a woman, marrying, or begetting children. Satan’s temptations of Jesus make no appeal to sexual passion (Mt. 4.1-11). Sex seems to play no role at all in the heaven toward which we aspire. Certainly, Jesus in His glorified body does not do much to affirm an earthly male’s “full sexual identity.”

I do not see this as a problem. It is not clear why we should require having our “full sexual identity affirmed in the image and likeness of God.” What kind of affirmation are we, or should we, be seeking? Exactly how *like* us does God need to be for us to be “affirmed”? Our eye color is a part of our identity, as is our height. Must we occasionally picture God with blue eyes for blue eyed people to relate to God? Our occupations are part of our identities. Must we all refer to God occasionally as an accountant in order for accountants to relate to God? Do we need a worker/proletariat God? Should an international hermaphrodite have died on the cross? If I can relate only to a God that is sufficiently like me, and others can relate only to a God that is sufficiently like them, does worship become timesharing, with each worshiper’s God given equal time, and the other worshipers marking time until their God is mentioned? Or do we opt for a variegated God, patched together from different races and genders, with one half taller than the other, clothed in work boots, blue

jeans, a floral blouse, a business jacket and half a hat?

There is nothing new in this question. We humans have a tendency to want to make God over in our own image in our art and literature and in our private thoughts. Perhaps certain Renaissance painters thought it facilitated worship to picture Jesus as handsome and southern European rather than as plain (Isaiah 53.2) and Semitic. Perhaps they could not relate easily to a Semitic savior. Perhaps nowadays some women, and men, are more comfortable with a female, or alternately male/female, image of God, than with an exclusively male image of God. Perhaps, for some people, referring to God as "He" constrains them to understand God according to their negative stereotype of twentieth century American males, or it may cause them to associate God with Michelangelo's painting of God on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel—a white-haired and bearded Italian man, old but still vigorous, who wears a robe. Whatever these difficulties, and however much they are magnified by the welcome circumstance of an openly pluralistic society, I think it is no sin to refer to God according to the example of the Bible, however much that example is in conflict with currently fashionable thinking or even with currently fashionable prejudice.

Some people might want to make the gendering of God a stalking horse for other issues. The theologian Werner Neuer has argued at length that the subordination of women is a Creation ordinance.⁶ It might follow then that God would choose male terms as an expression of His lordship. Such a view would ground a stronger conclusion than mine. It would *require* everyone to refer to God as "He" and not as "She." My conclusion is *merely the denial of the impropriety* of a practice exhibited throughout the Bible, referring to God as "He" and never as "She." This claim is separable from any particular thesis about why that practice was exhibited. A different battle for which the reference issue may be playing proxy is the issue of goddess worship, re-imagining God as Nature. Referring to God as "She" seems to be taken, on both sides in that debate, as helping to legitimize such re-imagining in our culture. Perhaps both sides are right, and referring to God as "She" at this time would serve primarily to help transform Christian practice into something more akin to paganism. Still, I believe the question of how to refer to God can be addressed apart from such controversies. Thus, I have not offered a rationale for the Biblical practice of referring to God solely in male terms. Rather, I simply note that the practice (possibly excepting metaphors) is exemplified throughout the Bible by every figure who refers to God in engendered terms, including Jesus.

One might suppose that Jesus was merely making allowances for the social practices of the time, that like the framers of the Thirteenth Amendment, Jesus thought women would have to "wait their turn." I could see Paul doing something like that, since Paul seems to make a virtue of accommodating local practices in order to focus attention on the central message of the gospel (cf., Timothy's adult circumcision. (Acts 16.3)). Jesus, however, was quite blunt in confronting the status quo. Part of Jesus's ministry involved puncturing false beliefs about the will and nature of God, even when doing so angered and alienated the self-right-

eous. I do not see how we could reconcile what we know of Jesus with the thesis that He actively practiced immoral discrimination in order to placate local sensibilities.

Again, I am arguing for the permissibility of referring to God exclusively in male terms, not for the obligation to do so. This is contra those who argue that Christians have an obligation to refer to God, at least sometimes, in female terms. Advocates of that view must somehow show both that there is presently an *ultima facie obligation* on all Christians to use female terms, at least sometimes, in referring to God, and also that there was no such *ultima facie obligation* for the people of the Bible.⁷ That task has not been discharged.

University of Alabama

NOTES

1. George F. Isham, "Is God Exclusively a Father?" *Faith and Philosophy* 13 (1996), 266-71; all page numbers in parentheses in the text refer to this article.

William Harper, "On Calling God 'Mother'," *Faith and Philosophy* 11 (1994), 290-97.

2. Patricia Altenbernd Johnson, "Feminist Christian Philosophy?", *Faith and Philosophy* 9 (1992), 320-34.

3. Monroe C. Beardsley, "The Metaphorical Twist," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 22 (1962), 294.

4. Donald Davidson, "What Metaphors Mean," in *On Metaphor*, ed. Sheldon Sacks (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978), pp. 29-45, esp. pp. 39, 43.

5. Harper, p. 295.

6. Werner Neuer, *Man and Woman in Christian Perspective* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1991), p. 140. In the same text (p. 124), Neuer condemns egoistic domination, and notes that Ephesians 25-33 requires selfless, sacrificial love on the part of the husband.

7. Alternatively, they could argue that Jesus, and the rest of the people cited in the Bible, failed to meet an *ultima facie obligation* to do so. I find that hard to reconcile with the thesis that Jesus lived without sinning. An even less likely tack would be to argue that there was no *ultima facie obligation* at that time because of social conventions. This would suggest that the present alleged *ultima facie obligation* is a product of social convention. My impression is that those alleging the existence of a present *ultima facie obligation* to refer to God in female terms have been *challenging* conventional usage by attempting to appeal to more enduring principles.