

[The Kindness of God: Metaphor, Gender, and Religious Language – By Janet Martin Soskice](#)

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Abstract:

This article is a review of the book *The Kindness of God: Metaphor, Gender, and Religious Language* by Janet Martin Soskice.

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Article:

Janet Martin Soskice , *The Kindness of God: Metaphor, Gender, and Religious Language* (Oxford : Oxford University Press , 2007) ix + 203 pp .

When I began to read *The Kindness of God*, I could scarcely put it down. I read the chapter on Julian of Norwich first and then from the beginning through the “Father” chapter at one sitting. Then I had to exercise some self-discipline to stop because “Blood and Defilement” beckoned and I could not afford to stay up all night! Among other charms, Soskice's writing enjoys a talent for titles. The title and subtitle of the recent book provide convenient hooks on which to summarize its contribution.

“The Kindness of God,” as a title, brings together several themes with some loveliness, expanding on Middle English senses of a phrase first employed by Julian of Norwich.

First, God's “kindness” provides an Anglo-Saxon word for God's substance: The abstract noun of God's “kind-ness” marks a unique kind beyond created kinds, their source and goal.

Second, the word implies a “theologically correct” relation between God and human creatures, calling them “kin” *without* appeal to some *tertium quid* that they might have in common. One obvious way to translate the famous “image and likeness” phrase of Genesis is to observe that

the Hebrew words (*tselim* and *dmut*) reappear in one other place: where Seth is said to be the “image and likeness” of Adam (Genesis 5:3). This clearly means that Seth resembles Adam as child resembles parent. At a different level of abstraction, then, human beings relate to God as God's children. They are, in English, kin.

Third, of course, the word “kindness” suggests that God's relation to creatures as their source and kin comes not by their desert but by God's kindness in the modern sense of grace.

The OED reveals that “kind” used to mean, furthermore, something rather like “gender,” which is, after all, its Latin cognate. So in Aelfric's translation of Genesis 9:23, what Shem and Japeth desired not to see was their father's “kind.” In *Piers Plowman*, adjectives agreed in “numbre,” “cas,” and “kynde.” In the sixteenth century, male and female are “both kindes.” And *The Faerie Queene* asks “what inquest made her dissemble her disguised kind?”

But “kind” does not mean “gender” any more, or in the theorized modern sense. And that remove is more of what Soskice turns to her advantage. Her word suggests more than it asserts. It does not constrict, confine, define, or offend; it walks mildly; it disposes matters *suaviter*. At this remove, “kindness” enjoys the advantage of expressing relatedness to God so as both to avoid gender's constraints (“Father” language alone), and to evoke its benefits—the kinship not only of fathers, but of mothers and the chosen kinships of love and marriage. The kindness of God invokes therefore not only the lately competing metaphors of father and mother, but returns them to the much larger context of biblical stories about brothers and sisters and lovers and weddings. Joseph and his brothers, Ruth and Boaz and Naomi, the lovers in the Song of Songs, and numerous parables of Jesus can now all shed light on the kindness of God. In that enlarged company, the sometimes ugly controversies over gendered language find themselves gently displaced. To describe for us a God who neither refuses to assume a gender as incarnate, nor reduces to a gender as God, Soskice's skill with metaphor and religious language performs the rarest of services: it dissolves the problem by transcending its terms.

It belongs to the grace of Soskice's approach that much of that goes without saying, so that it is almost a shame to spell it out: but the subtitle does gesture in that direction. “Metaphor, Gender, and Religious Language” both recalls the connection with her magisterial first book, *Metaphor and Religious Language* (Clarendon Press, 1985), and extends its analysis to topics from gender and atonement to Trinity and salvation, a light-fingered dogmatics upon a theme. In the United States, “gender” is a good word, and if you use “sex” (biology) when you mean “gender” (social presentation), then people regard you as behind the times. In common with modern gender theory, this book asks not about God's sex—God lies beyond sex as source of its variety—but about what you might indeed helpfully call God's “social presentation,” the ways in which God is revealed, or (to gender the terms) “veiled” and “unveiled.” The presentation of God to human beings—whether God's own self-presentation, or human presentations of God—bears some comparison to the current American fascination with the (self- or other) presentations of gender. The tone and mode here are as far as possible from queer theory, but Soskice shares with Judith

Butler the hope “not to negate or refuse either term” but to “*mobilize* the signifier in the service of an alternative production.” (See “Contingent Foundations,” in Seyla Benhabib, et al., *Feminist Contentions*[Oxford and New York: Routledge, 1995], pp. 35–57; here, pp. 51, 52.)

The book maintains a marvelous tone. Its manner is kind. It belabors nothing. It does not argue particularly with contrary points of view. Its mildness of tone belongs to a real interest in the inquiry. The tone constructs both the author and the reader as people with interests, who care, who seek to understand something without heat. Everywhere there prevails a light touch. A light touch is such a rare thing. I could name contrary examples to show how rare a thing a light touch is, but that would be invidious—and if I am right, you will be able to supply your own favorite examples of ax-grinding without my naming any. Soskice's scholarly voice is nearly unique. She shares with Thomas Aquinas the virtue of arguing with ideas, while leaving her opponents unnamed. This is no private virtue, but bears important consequences for training students. Polemic generates a certain energy, but forms students into teams. Students so formed can feel dispensed from the sympathetic understanding of “the other side,” and they can become cocky in defense of their own crowd. Soskice avoids the *rabies theologorum*, and models a hermeneutics of charity. That is one reason why *Metaphor and Religious Language* remains a classic. Soskice's charity in *The Kindness of God* is not a matter of tone only, but also of method, choice, cultivation, and discipline; the opening chapter on “Love and Attention” explains how. Soskice makes a method of the demands of the active and the contemplative life. The patience, mildness, and interest in inquiry that grace the text arise, I imagine, of concrete practices of thinking together with those who really desire to understand. The belabored, argumentative tone that I am happy to miss arises, by contrast, from contemplation turned in on itself, a feature that intelligent children, eager undergrads, and curious laypeople asking about women, men, and God would not appreciate.

Metaphor and Religious Language treats its topic so that one of the signal disputes of late twentieth-century English-language theology may now be regarded as settled. *The Kindness of God* treats the even more fraught topic of God and gender with a range, delight, and finesse that no one else, as far as I can think, could manage.