A PRECEDENT FOR THE "PARENTHOOD" OF GOD

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As the consciousness of women in American society generally has expanded, it has increasingly made itself felt within the country's churches. And while some Christian sects are coming to terms with it more comfortably that others, none are long likely to escape the implications of the women's movement for those concerns they hold most vital.

Among many faithful women and men there is an intensely felt need for considerable revision in precept and practice within their respective churches, particularly in matters of domestic life, social values, and church government. In order to expand the consciousness of their fellows and to open up discussion of what are felt to be more critical issues, many have begun their attempt at reformation with an attack on the needless masculinity of the language and rhetoric in the currently available translations of Scripture, in the present habits of preaching, and in the ordinary prayers and hymns of public worship. Why, increasing numbers of people are asking, must Christians at every turn face the image of the *fatherhood* of God?

Sexist language is an issue of the greatest acuteness among what, for want of a better term, might be called centrist sects in the spectrum of American Christianity—heirs in practice, if not in name, to the latitudinarian movement begun in the third quarter of the seventeenth century in England. Among Catholics and Episcopalians, whose principal form of public worship is focused upon the eucharistic ritual and whose priesthood is most exclusive, the ordination of women is the most controversial and consuming issue. Among the more radical Protestant sects, on the other hand, those bound to a highly literal reading and exposition of Scripture, feminism very often amounts to yet another manifestation of worldly corruption which makes it a cutting edge between belief and non-belief. For the centrist sects, however, those for whom worship is focused upon the reception and the exposition of the Word but for whom the Word of God is contained *in* Scripture rather than present in every word of the text, a feminist interpretation of Scripture is the sensitive issue. For these people what might be called a feminist theology is clearly possible without great violence to their sense of priesthood, form of church government, or faith in the primacy of Scripture.

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For feminists among the centrist sects, then, to seek a sexually neutral language and rhetoric in the translation of Scripture and in the conduct of public worship is a natural first and necessary step toward the development of such a theology. It is, of course, just as natural and important for those opposing feminism on one ground or another to resist the commonly proposed linguistic changes. The "fatherhood of God," if you will, is a far more important issue than many are willing to acknowledge.

Many people, however, respond to the feminists on this issue with the charge that they are making trouble for the church, at a time when its weakness as an institution is increasingly apparent, over a matter of no real consequence. Ironically, this view that the feminist point is trivial is often shared by those who have made extensive commitments to women's equality both within the church and without. The "paternity" of God, the "brotherhood" of Christians, "Man" as the collectivity of people represent, in this view, simply a manner of speaking, a traditionally certified and comfortable mode of expression. All recognize, it is argued, that the first and third persons of the Trinity are without gender, that the community of Christians is equally open to all, and that mankind is only a figure of speech for the species. What then, one often hears, is all the fuss about? It is not at the very least awkward, at the worst seriously divisive to tinker with conventional idiom? There is a further irony in these views being held in a Christian dispensation which at least since the seventeenth century has freely adapted its idiom to contemporary cultural conditions and just as freely rejected tradition as a reliable authority in religious doctrine and practice.

It is this situation, then, which leads me to note a seventeenth-century English precedent for a genderless rendering of the Lord's prayer. The concerns which prompted John Wilkins (1614-1672) to write "Our Parent who art in Heaven," in a transcription of the Lord's Prayer in his *Essay Towards a Real Character and a Philosophical Language* (1668), had nothing to do as such with feminism as we now understand it. And as far as I can determine no one took any notice of it. His concerns, rather, were scientific accuracy in language and religious toleration. What might have otherwise been simply a curiosity, however, is now I think a matter of greater interest, as it may provide one perspective useful to an understanding of the argument for conceiving of God as a parent rather than as a father.

"Moderation" more than any other term best describes John Wilkin's character and performance in public life in an age, unlike our

own, when the separation of the sacred and the secular was not possible and when, very much like the present, excess was the rule. Wilkins is best remembered as a founder of modern science. A serious experimenter and promoter of the new philosophy, he was one of the organizers of the Royal Society. Although it is now less well remembered, Wilkins had an important career in the church. During the civil war he took the parliamentary side, and as chancellor at Oxford distinguished himself by protecting the university from the excesses of Puritan zeal. At the Restoration Wilkins was reconciled to crown and church, and as Bishop of Chester devoted himself to protecting nonconformists from the excesses of Anglican zeal. His contemporary, Gilbert Burnet described him as one of those "who study to propagate better thoughts, to take men off of being in parties, or from narrow notions, from superstitious conceits and a furiousness about opinions."[1]

In general Wilkin's theology was Calvinistic, although he did not share the taste of his contemporaries for theological intricacy and dispute; it was of a tempered sort more akin to that of the twentieth than the seventeenth century. He is among the developers of that disposition in matters of religion we now call latitudinarianism and an early spokesman for natural religion. Wilkins's *On the Principles and Duties of Natural Religion (1678)* sought to demonstrate that reason and the empirical study of nature were appropriate exercises of faith which confirm revelation. He consciously steered a course between the twin errors, in his view, of enthusiasm and deism.

Wilkins's *Essay Towards a Real Character and a Philosophical Language* is a natural outgrowth of both his scientific and religious concerns. It was commissioned by and dedicated to the Royal Society and proposed that the society sponsor, after the manner of the French Academy, the development of an entirely new language for the easy and secure communication of knowledge—"a language suited to the nature of things." "If to every thing and notion there were assigned a distinct *Mark,* together with some *provision* to express Grammatical *Derivations* and *Inflexions;* this might suffice as to one great end of a *Real Character,* namely, the expression of our Conceptions by *Marks* which should signifie *things* and not words."[2] The bulk of the *Essay* is devoted to a demonstration of the feasibility of the project. He provides "a regular Enumeration and Description of all those Things

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[1]*History of My Own Time,* Osmond Airy, ed. (Oxford, 1897-1900), I, pp.332-333.
[2]John Wilkins, *An Essay Towards a Real Character and a Philosophical Language* (London, 1668), p. 21.

and Notions to which Names are to be assigned,"[3] and develops a system of "hieroglyphick" markings designed to represent the items in his extensive catalogue of nomina. Finally, Wilkins illustrates his system by transcribing the Lord's Prayer and the Creed into the philosophical language and providing a word by word translation back into English and a full explanation of the relationship between each character and each word.

To confront a page Wilkin's philosophical language is a little like facing a page of Samuel Pepys's shorthand, yet a system of secret scientific writing is the direct opposite of his intention. Wilkin's proposal for a universal language is a part of a general movement in the seventeenth century to reform language, to bring human discourse in science and religion back down to earth after the flights of medieval and renaissance practice. Since Bacon's plea for a real character which would represent "neither letters nor words, but things and notions" and "serve for an antidote against the curse of the confusion of tongues,"[4] the reformation of language had been an integral part of the attack on scholasticism whose linguistic slight of hand was held responsible not only for errors in science but for political chaos and religious confusion. In his attack on scholasticism and the vestiges of it in his own time, Joseph Glanvill represents a view common to both scientific and religious thinkers when he says, "What a number of words here have nothing answering to them? and as many are imposed at random... Now hence the genuine *Idea's* of the Mind are adulterate and the Things themselves lost in a crowd of *Names,* and *intentional nothings.* Thus these Verbosities do emasculate the understanding; and render it slight and frivolus, as its objects."[5]

Wilkin's primary aim in the *Essay,* of course, is to promote the

[3]An Abstract of Dr. Wilkin's Essay Towards a Real Character and a Philosophical Language," The Mathematical and Philosophical Works of John Wilkins (London, 1708), p. 179. This abstract is a useful access to the premises of the work and some of its background.

[4]Francis Bacon, *Of the Advancement of Learning,* Bk. VI, Ch. 1; *The Works of Francis Bacon,* James Spalding, et. al., eds, (London, 1858), IV, pp. 438-448. This chapter in the history of ideas has been studied extensively; virtually all the major work on the role of science and religion in the reformation of the English language in the seventeenth century may be found by consulting R. W. Bailey and D. M. Burton, *English Stylistics: A Bibliography* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1968). For information relating specifically to Wilkins consult Barbara J. Shapiro, *John Wilkins, 1614-1672, An Intellectual Biography* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1969); Benjamin DeMott, "The Sources and Development of John Wilkins' Philosophical Language," *JEGP* 57 (1958), 1-13; James Knowlnson, *Universal Language Schemes in England and France* 1600-1800 (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1975.

[5]Joseph Glanvill, *The Vanity of Dogmatizing* (London, 1661), p. 151. Glanvill too was a clergyman and a member of the Royal Society and for him as for Wilkins the study of nature could be a form of Christian devotion. See Jackson I. Cope, *Joseph Glanvill Anglican Apologist* (St. Louis: Washington UP, 1956), especially Chapter 7, "Anglicanism and Plain Prose."

rigorous study of science through improved communication, yet he is attentive, as were all scientists in his day, to practical benefits. And the aid to religion is given even greater emphasis than to improving world commerce and extending the knowledge of nature. He felt that the philosophical language would "contribute much to the clearing of some Modern Differences in Religion, by unmasking many wild Errors that shelter themselves under Disguise of Affected Phrases; which being philosophically unfolded, and rendered according to the Genuine and Natural Importance of Words, would appear to be Inconsistencies and Contradictions; and several of those pretended Mysterious Profound Notions, express'd in Big Swelling Words, by which Men set up for. Reputation, being this way examin'd, would either appear to be Nonsense, or very jejune."[6]

Having examined the Lord's Prayer in this way, Wilkins, without any fanfare, renders it simply as "Our Parent who art in heaven."[7] And he does so on philosophical grounds, simply because, if we take our knowledge as it is, "parent" is more accurate, makes better sense than "father," which in the strictest sense means "male parent." Wilkins notes that "father" is used metaphorically in this context and is not a designation necessary to the understanding of prayer. While "father" in this context is certainly not a swelling word which lends itself to nonsense or the jejune, he is, I think consciously, opting to exclude the use of metaphoor.

This selective exclusion of metaphor in the interests of science is I think analagous to the selective exclusion of unnecessary masculinities in the translations of Scripture, preaching, and prayers and hymns of public worship in the interests of feminism. Both efforts may be seen as attempts to integrate concerns which had before been separated or even seen as antithetical. Both efforts may be viewed as facts of reconciliation, rather than accomodation, between traditional faith and an inescapable cultural development. Both, moreover, steer a course between extreme responses to the impact of cultural change in the church when such responses are the fashion rather than the exception. And finally, both efforts recognize the importance of language.

Wilkin's precedent for the parenthood of God is an academic point, not likely to have much of an impact, if any at all, among those whose lot it is to resolve differences between those who would and those who would not reform the church's language and rhetoric. Yet time and again we discover that it is the old world yet; there is very

[6]"An Abstract," pp. 170-171; see also *Real Character,* "Epistle Dedicatory," sig. a 2
[7]*Real Character,* Pt. IV, ii., pp. 395-396.

little new under the sun concerning the basic issues among people. While historical perspectives may not solve contemporary differences, they may relieve some of their discomfort.