

Fatherhood and the Names of God

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Abstract

Our names for God indicate much about our understanding of and our relationship to God. Feminists have criticized the name "Father" as legitimating male dominance in church and society. Many recent writers have argued that all names for God are metaphorical in nature, without adequately considering that analogy may provide a stronger methodology for warranting such names. Predicates applied to God should be products of progressive discovery of the divine nature rather than projection from human need. Divergent ethical ramifications will result from our names of God.

I

The ancient Hebrews had many names for God,² but because of a profound theological respect for the one Deity referred to by any name in the permissible stock, they disliked to say the divine name. In fact they had a method of writing God's name which was considered so holy that it could be spoken just once a year on the High Holiday, by the High Priest alone, within the chamber of the Holy of Holies, the inner sanctum of the Jerusalem Temple.

Undertaking his public teaching effort in the Jewish context, Jesus continued and intensified the importance placed on naming God. Thus he taught his followers to pray what has become known as the Lord's Prayer: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name" (Mt. 6.9 NRSV). From this most famous opening line, countless volumes of theology have poured forth; and recently, much of the outpouring has been negative for reasons which we shall consider below. (See, for example, Thistlethwaite 109-25). But first let us consider the radical nature of these words in their first century context. One of the biblical reasons cited for the animosity felt toward Jesus by some of his contemporaries was his habit of calling God "Father" (Jn. 5.18). Joachim Jeremias, one of the foremost Bible scholars of this century, points out that Jesus uses the name "Father" over 170 different times in the four gospels, not counting parallel repetitions. On the night he is arrested, in the key moment of his passionate struggle in Gethsemane, Jesus addresses God with the Aramaic/Hebrew appellation "Abba" (Mk. 14.36), a term which has more the intimate sense of

“Daddy” than that of a distant, challenging father figure. Jeremias contends about Jesus:

that *Abba* as an address to God is *ipsissima vox*, an authentic and original utterance of Jesus, and that this *Abba* implies the claim of a unique revelation and a unique authority. ... We are confronted with something new and unheard of which breaks through the limits of Judaism. Here we see who the historical Jesus was: the man who had the power to address God as *Abba*. (30)

While Paul has his own theological ax to grind, he does continue this emphasis on calling God *Father*: “When we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ it is the Spirit himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God” (Rom. 8.15–16). This appellation became one of the distinguishing marks, if not the distinguishing mark, of being Jesus’ follower. The early texts employ it with a vigor which is too easily obscured to us by centuries of institutionalized use.

Returning to Jesus’ “Our Father,” we can see that Jesus not only directly addresses God as “Father,” but conspicuously using the plural pronoun, he invites his followers to do likewise. Naming God as *our* Father, and combining this naming with Jesus’ other universalizing emphases, as in the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk. 10.29–37), Jesus places all humanity in a structural relationship with the God so named. And once the “Our Father” has placed humanity in that structural relationship with God, the ethical implications of the shared relationship cannot be avoided: all people must be considered as sister and brother to one another. Taken seriously, the first two words of Jesus’ “Our Father” prayer provide an on-going framework for both theology and ethics, an insight into Jesus’ multi-faceted teachings.

Having specified the name of God, Jesus draws a halo around it: “Hallowed be your name.” The name is lifted into a sacred, noetic space. The innovation of the direct address to God as Father is linked to the ancient Jewish respect for the name of God. A new level of sacred appellation has been linked to a new level of intimacy. By Jesus’ creative act of naming, a new connection has been elucidated between the transcendent Deity and the familiar, everyday world of humanity.

Some years ago I was teaching in a small town in Australia’s “deep North.” Being a so-called “Christian democracy,” Australia, and particularly Queensland, had some laws with droll bearing on our present topic. When the local bars would close at ten o’clock each night, the streets would typically be populated by a few blokes who had had a bit much of the grog. Since there were only two or three bars in town, the police could pretty easily handled the situation, and each morning the local paper would list those

arrested for the usual sorts of things drunk men do upon leaving a bar. One of those punishable activities was cursing in public, which confrontations with the police and with one another regularly seemed to spark. In the morning paper listing arrests, there were two classifications of illegal language: obscenity and profanity. Obscenity might best be exemplified by what we commonly know as the "f-word," and profanity by the oft-heard "God damn it." As I remember it, the f-word drew a fine of about \$50 while profaning the name of God might cost the inebriated offender a solid \$100. In the conception of Australian law, profanity was the more serious because it violated the sacred space of the divine name.

II

The long history of relating to God as Father has recently come upon a bumpy road. As a result of the feminist critique, the academic and theological worlds in recent years have largely adopted the use of what is called "inclusive language." This feminist criticism has caught fire and grown to such proportions that words such as "man" and "mankind" have been replaced by terms which are not gender-specific, such as "human," or "humankind." While these changes have been resisted by some as unnecessary or unaesthetic, generally speaking, public discourse has recognized and reacted to the problem of inclusiveness. It is now quite common to refer to a "chairperson" rather than a "chairman." We are also far more likely to have a woman chairperson than during previous epochs, a social development undoubtedly related to the feminist critique. A remarkable transformation of gender usage and mutually related social practice has taken place; not surprisingly, some discomfort and confusion have followed along with it.

In the theological world, more radical seminaries and churches were the first to respond to the feminist criticism; but by now all but the most entrenched seminaries and churches have begun to hear women's voices and concerns. While I strongly affirm the inclusion of women as equal partners at every level of church and society, the concern of this paper is with the crisis in religious language (the names of God) which has resulted from the feminist criticism of exclusively male terminology for the Deity. Problematically, the language of liturgical and private devotions has often been neutralized in attempting to respond to what are broadly admitted as just concerns. Pointedly, Jesus' "Our Father" is increasingly changed to "Our Creator." Where the theological and liturgical language has resisted change, many women and men feel (oftentimes bitterly) that the church is not listening.

In what has sometimes been a chaotic questioning process, most churches and seminaries have given ground wherever possible. However, the question of the fatherhood of God has proved far more controversial. Addressing God as Father has been such a central ingredient of Christian self-identity that its removal is inconceivable to some. Yet feminists have not hesitated to point to it as the arch-legitimator of male religious authority. (See, for instance, Daly). Increasingly, it has been difficult for congregations to sing with unity. Programming any of the many hymns which specify God as Father, even old favorites with continuing popularity, can become cause for controversy. On one of the most vital issues of theological language, the fatherhood of God, progressive discussion has nearly stalled.

In an attempt to move the discussion forward, Sallie McFague has taken a metaphorical approach to understanding language generally and theological language specifically. McFague begins with the assumption that Jesus' use of the fatherhood of God was metaphorical. Since metaphors are context dependent and can become outworn, it is not only permissible to replace them; it is mandatory to do so. Otherwise there are two dangers. First, frequent use causes the metaphor to lose its original excitement; having lost its linguistic bite, a metaphor is like salt which has lost its savor, club soda without the bubbles. Its original heuristic stimulus having gone flat, the metaphor is no longer useful; it needs to be replaced. The second danger is that a metaphor (such as McFague asserts the fatherhood of God to be) can become idolatrous if the image it portrays is confused with the divine being itself (*Metaphorical Theology* 145). This brings us to the crucial point: metaphorical terms are powerful devices for the user, but they make no claims about the nature of the referent in itself. With regard to the divine nature itself, metaphor remains agnostic.

Upon this theoretical basis McFague concludes that there is no reason not to name God *Mother* as well as *Father*; or, for that matter, as *Lover* or some other name. The problem is that total freedom to name God collapses into a subjective arbitrariness, hence justifying Feuerbach's old suspicion that all God-talk is just anthropological projection disguised from the speaker. Without some staying link to the referent, we are left with an emotivistic whatever-works-for-you. And this situation renders public discourse either meaningless or impossible.

There is a danger of stalemate. For those at all interested in either Jesus or the Church, a lot is at stake, especially if the feminist critique is calling into question what may have been one of Jesus' central teachings, and unquestionably his preferred name for God. Is there a way forward? I think there is, although understanding the solution may take more effort than

understanding the problem. Within the confines of this presentation, I would like to sketch the broad lines of an argument for analogical predication which might allow greater confidence in our attempt to name God.

III

An apropos forerunner to this discussion took place in the thirteenth century, as the medievals tried to grasp how human words can refer to God. The greatest of the medieval thinkers, Thomas Aquinas, directly addressed the issue under the title: *de nominibus Dei* – The Names of God (I.13). While a complicated metaphysics underlies his work on how humans may properly come to God, we can begin with Aquinas' distinctions and provide metaphysical clarifications as necessary.

Aquinas identifies two extremes which must be avoided: univocation and equivocation. First, it must not be thought that our words, and this includes words of the Bible, refer to God univocally. Univocal reference signifies a common essence such as in definitions, e.g., when we use "animal" to refer to the definitions of both "cow" and "donkey." While the notion of univocation has recently been called into question,³ for our purposes we can bracket this tangential skirmish since it is only presented as a rejected option. Nonetheless, the *theoretical* pole of univocation will help us locate one extreme on the spectrum of speech.

On the other extreme is equivocation, by which the same word means different things. As Aquinas put it: "Whatever is predicated of various things under the same name but not in the same sense, is predicated equivocally" (I.13.5). Aquinas later illustrates the point by discussing how the term "lion" is applied to God (I.13.6). By metaphorically naming God as a lion, we are trying to call forth a sense of divine strength and power. However, we do not mean to say that God is a four-legged carnivore. In order to appropriate the sense of lion which we want for God, we must deny the primary meaning of the term (a four-legged carnivore). The simultaneous denial of the primary meaning and affirmation of the metaphorical meaning constitutes equivocation.

In our exploration of how human words refer to God, we have now located the two extremes of intention. The first, univocal predication, *intends* a precise, almost one-to-one correspondence (I freely grant that it may not achieve such precision).⁴ The second, equivocation, intends quite different meanings for the same term. For language about God, the problem is that univocation claims far too much and that equivocation does not claim enough, since the name chosen in equivocation does not actually give the sense of the divine essence in itself. Due to the simul-

taneous presence of affirmation and denial (as seen in all metaphorical naming), strongly agnostic elements are virtually inevitable. Thus, Sallie McFague candidly states: “We try out different models and metaphors in an attempt to talk about what we do not know how to talk about: the relationship between God and the world” (*Models of God* xii). Between the opposite theological dangers of univocation and equivocation, Aquinas develops analogy as a golden mean, a middle way. Let us look briefly at the metaphysics he uses to support analogical naming of God.

The underlying metaphysics begins with the conception that God is Subsistent Being Itself (*Ipsum Esse Subsistens*). As such, God is conceived of as pure actuality (*actus purus*), lacking nothing by way of infinite perfection. God is the only being whose existence is unlimited by essence.

On the other hand, creatures are limited in actuality or existence. Finite essence is the limit of finite existence. Some light may be shed on this subject by realizing that if finite essence did not limit existence, then we would be infinite. And if we were to possess infinite existence, we could logically do no more than duplicate the infinite existence which God already possesses. Were God to bring us into existence as infinite beings, such an act would be more akin to repetition than Creation. The freshness of Creation is involved in our creaturely limits. God, however, has no limiting essence; the divine essence *is* the greatest and most fundamental perfection or quality—existence itself. Where God possesses existence *per essentiam*, by essence, creatures possess existence *per participationem*, by participation. I hope that this very brief sketch of a very complicated notion will suffice. Let us now examine how certain terms qualify for analogical predication.

The medievals referred to a certain class of terms as “transcendentals” because they did not lose their meaning when applied in different contexts. These transcendentals, such as “good,” “true,” and “being,” turn out to be the best candidates for analogical predication; for they possess the inherent flexibility to stretch their meaning, without losing or distorting it, across different levels of existence, even from the finite to the infinite. Characteristically, they are not context-dependent. Unlike equivocal terms, analogical predicates literally mean what they say. For example, we would hardly speak of the divine being on the cross as a “lion.” In fact, “lamb” is the more traditional choice in this context. Yet there is no context in which we would deny that God is “good.”

As a theory, analogy is primarily about the relationship between an infinite Creator God and the finite creatures of that God. Analogical terms, which are derived from, and expressive of, this relationship, are actually intensified when they are applied to God. The accomplishment of this intensification is really an outworking of the logic of Creation. God

is not only the cause of the quality (perfection) which exists in the creature, God also possesses the given quality to an infinite degree. Hence humans may participate in (have a share of) the quality, such as goodness, while God is said to *be* goodness. This gives rise to what has been called the analogy of causal participation. God both possesses the given quality infinitely and eminently, and, as Creator, causes the possibility of finite possession or participation in the quality. In God's case, normal usage gets stretched because God is said to be both goodness itself (in the abstract sense), and also to be infinitely good (in the concrete sense). David Burrell had called this coupling of abstract and concrete the "principle of complementarity" (*Aquinas: God and Action* 21, 25, 31). We need to say both the abstract and concrete expressions in order to convey both the infinite unity of God (simplicity) and the infinite actuality.

In contrast to the divine unity and infinity, finite creatures understand and express all things in accordance with the mode of finite existence, through a composition of essence and existence. The most basic division of our language, that between subject and verb, expresses all things through linking a predicate to a given subject, i.e., through composition. To the objection that composed beings cannot understand a simple being of infinite actuality, Aquinas agrees that we cannot comprehend all there is to know of God's perfection; however, he also insists that we can comprehend something. For example, the human intellect can understand the nature of a rock without existing on same level as the rock. The rock is a material thing, but our mode of understanding it is intellectual, i.e., immaterial. Similarly, we can understand something of God even though God exists on a higher level than the human mind. In formulating human understanding of God, we do so in the manner through which we express all our knowledge – through the mode of composition, or, otherwise put, through the separation of subject and predicate. But our composed mode of being and knowing does not nullify our knowledge of God, any more than not being a rock nullifies all knowledge of rocks. As Aquinas put it:

Any intellect which understands that the thing is otherwise than it is, is false. But this does not hold in the present case; because our intellect, when forming a proposition under God, does not affirm that He is composite, but that He is simple.

... For the mode of the intellect in understanding is different than the mode of the thing in its essence. Since it is clear that our intellect understands material things below itself in an immaterial manner; not that it understands them to be immaterial things; but its manner of understanding is immaterial. Likewise, when it understands simple things above itself, it understands them according to its own mode, which is in a composite manner; yet not so as to understand them to be composite things. And thus our intellect is not false in forming composition in its ideas about God. (I.13.12.3)

Our intellect is operating in the only mode available to it, even as it recognizes another mode of existence for God.

Incorporating a kind of epistemological humility, analogy avoids the presumption of univocal claims; just the same, it does affirm something positive about God and so avoids “the fallacy of equivocation,” in which case “it follows that from creatures nothing could be known or demonstrated about God at all” (I.13.5). Anything could be said or nothing could be said—it would amount to the same thing. In taking the median course, analogical speech about God makes a modest but significant claim: modest because the human condition is bounded by limitations; significant because even in the human condition, which is definitely the best one we have, we can know and express something. Failing to uphold this precious knowledge, limited though it is, would be both false and debilitating.

In the current controversy about religious language, Aquinas’ distinction between metaphorical and analogical predication still has something to contribute:

All names applied metaphorically to God are applied to creatures primarily rather than to God, because when said of God they mean only similitudes to such creatures. For as *smiling* applied to a field means only that the field in the beauty of its flowerings is like to the beauty of the human smile by proportionate likeness, so the name of *lion* applied to God means only that God manifests strength in His works, as a lion in his. Thus it is clear that applied to God the signification of names can be defined only from what is said of creatures. But to other names not applied to God in a metaphorical sense, the same rule would apply if they were spoken of God as the cause only, as some have supposed. For when it is said, *God is good*, it would then only mean, *God is the cause of the creature’s goodness*; thus the term *good* applied to God would include in its meaning the creature’s goodness. Hence *good* would apply primarily to creatures rather than God. But as was shown above (A.2), these names are applied to God not as the cause only, but also essentially. For the words, *God is good*, or *wise*, signify only that He is the cause of wisdom or goodness, but that these exist in Him in a more excellent way. Hence as regards what the name signifies, these names are applied primarily to God rather than to creatures, because these perfections flow from God to creatures; but as regards the imposition of the names, they are primarily applied by us to creatures which we know first. (I.13.6)

So while goodness, beauty, and being itself may appear to be attributes which belong first and foremost to human life, in the logic of Creation, as depicted by the analogy of causal participation, all such attributes are perfectly, infinitely, and first and foremost in the being of God. Only through the generosity of Creation are these “transcendentals” shared with humans. Now none of this says that we should not use metaphor in theology. But it does mean that there is another way, namely analogy, which makes the much greater claim that because God and creatures

actually share certain attributes, we can affirm terms for God without having to deny them.

My methodological argument might be summarized as follows: If I say, "God is a mighty fortress," I must deny the literal meaning of my words in order to achieve a greater metaphorical meaning about the strength of God. When I sing Luther's famous hymn, "A Mighty Fortress is Our God," I do not mean that God is a well-constructed structure of stone, brick, and other material defenses. If asked, I would deny that God is material at all. Precisely in the sense that I must deny the primary, anchored meaning of the term, I am equivocating in calling God "a mighty fortress." Thus, as Paul Ricoeur has suggested, metaphor simultaneously employs the sense of "is and is not" (cited by McFague, *Models of God* 33). My point is not that we should avoid metaphor; it is only that one both affirms and denies in using it; hence, equivocation is present in all such cases. By contrast, in analogy no such denial or equivocation takes place. Thus certain names for God are in fact privileged, and a pervasive agnosticism in speech about God can be avoided.

Conclusion

In one of his discussions of analogy, Aquinas directly addresses the issue of divine fatherhood:

I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, of Whom all paternity in heaven and earth is named (Eph. iii. 14, 15); and the same applies to the other names applied to God and the creatures. Therefore these names are applied primarily to God rather than to creatures. (I.13.6)

In other words, human fatherhood is named after, and is ontologically derived from, the eternal fact of the fatherhood of God. Once again, the key point of the analogy of causal participation is that God both possesses the given attribute in an eminent way, and, as Creator, causes the attribute to appear in humans. Thus seen, human fatherhood, like all valuable possibilities of finite life, is itself made possible by the fatherhood of God. Even more importantly, in an age in which so many human fathers are faltering in their family life, human fathers need to discover and to enact more of the potential of fatherhood by looking to, and learning from, the fatherhood of God.⁵

Very much is at stake in the way we talk about, and talk to, God. A retreat into silence before we understand all that can be grasped is a serious failure of a vital human task. If nothing else, the ethical ramifications of the naming process should deter such early withdrawal. For

example, calling God a “mighty warrior” will play out differently from calling God a “loving Mother and Father of all humankind.” In the final analysis, the description is important in the same manner as a map is important. Reading a map is not the same thing as taking the journey itself, but it can be tremendously helpful, especially to inexperienced travelers.

Furthermore, when we are attracted to someone, as in the moments of falling in love, or in the igniting of a great friendship, we first find a way to identify, to name our friend or lover. Having done so, true friendship continues to enjoy the process of learning more and more about the other party. How absurd it would be to say that we loved someone but were uninterested in getting to know any more about their qualities and their true nature! In relationships, whether with God or with other people, the best names and developing understandings are achieved by direct contact with the person involved. We are not trying to manufacture a relationship by the clever use of names or descriptions. On the contrary, we are trying to bring our understandings into alignment with qualities discovered in the other person. For words can nurture the relationship, and the relationship gives meanings to the words. The human inability to describe God completely should not be cause for skepticism, for elusiveness is not the same thing as insignificance. Instead, such inability is an indicator of the lofty nature of the subject. The difficulty of the task does not call for ceasing our efforts, but for improving them.

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Notes

1. This is a revised version of a paper read at the Sixth Annual Blue Ridge Onomastic Symposium at Greensboro College, Greensboro, North Carolina, on April 6 1991.

2. Several names of God are repeatedly used in the Old Testament. Of these, *Yahweh*, taken from the tetragrammaton YHWH, is the most frequently encountered. Since the Hebrews came to regard it as the personal name of God, it was thought to be too holy to pronounce. The Hebrew *Adonai* ‘My Great Lord’ was pronounced in its stead. Other important names for God include *Elohim*, which is particularly interesting because of its being plural, and variations and compounds of *El*, a Hebrew name for God which the Hebrews shared with other Semitic tribes. These compounds include *El Shaddai* ‘God, the One of the Mountains’ (translated as “Almighty” by the Septuagint), *El Elyon* ‘God Most High,’ *El Olam* ‘God of Eternity,’ *El Berith* ‘God of the Covenant,’ and yet other names and titles. For a fuller account see Achtemeier 685–87.

3. For a fuller engagement of the issue of univocal speech, see my forthcoming book in the Academy Series, *Analogical Possibilities: How Words Refer to God*, especially chapter 7. See also Burrell, *Analogy and Philosophical Language*, and Swinburne, especially chapters 4 and 5.

4. In Plato's *Cratylus* (432b), Socrates points out that if one adds or subtracts a unit to the number ten, the identity of the number has been changed. However, if one is painting a portrait, subjects can be identified by those who know them even though the likenesses are not exact reproductions (something all political cartoonists realize). Now in both portraiture and words, one can move farther and farther away from exact likeness until a point is finally reached where the particularity of the subject is no longer perceivable. In this sense, the broader leeway of qualitative expression differs from the exactitude of purely mathematical symbols. Rephrasing a fanciful illustration of Plato's, imagine that with the help of some deity, an exact image of Boris Yeltsin could be recreated, not just a two-dimensional figure, but a living, breathing, three-dimensional "image" which was alike in every respect, a virtual clone. The problem would be that we could not tell the original from the image. Indeed, we now have two Yeltsins, not just one Yeltsin and an attempted representation of Yeltsin. Similarly, a map could theoretically be drawn closer and closer to actual distances until it achieved a one-to-one correspondence and complete accuracy. But in doing so, the original purpose of the smaller, more manageable tool of communication would be lost.

Like our illustrative clones and maps, words need not possess algorithmic precision in order to accomplish their intended meaning; and the basic concern of this paper primarily addresses the *intention* of the speaker, not the mathematical accuracy of words. Univocation, in relation to equivocation, occupies the opposite pole of the intended spectrum. All my argument requires from univocation is a theoretical location and an intentional possibility, not a perfect in every sense achievement.

5. I accept the feminist criticism that the sole emphasis on the fatherhood of God, with concomitant emphasis on the divine Son, has historically fit quite well with the assignment of women to second class status in religion. Nonetheless, analogical predication has stood for over seven hundred years and continues to provide a justification for calling God our Father. However, should we begin to take the trinitarian nature of God with the seriousness it deserves, I think a new paradigm will eventually emerge, one that includes the motherhood as well as the fatherhood of God. I am currently working on a manuscript which applies the basic lines of the formal, analogical argument used to justify the fatherhood of God to the motherhood of God.

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