

The New Theologians Series  
First of Three  
Stating the Problem  
July 3, 2011

Some of you will be able to remember the 70's better than others. In fact, some of you may not have even been born yet, when the rest of us were lookin' our best in long hair and skin-tight bell-bottoms. Now those were the days!

The 70's are characterized not only by questionable fashion choices, but questioning in general. People questioned authority figures, whether they be teachers, the military, or governmental figures. People began thinking that what was being spoken on their behalf was not what they thought nor part of their experience. This was the time of various liberation movements, such as the Women's Movement, Black Pride, and Gay Liberation. Theology, believe it or not, was likewise caught up in this time of questioning, sometimes rejecting views that had been dominant for several hundred years.

What I'd like to do for this and the next two Sundays is talk about some of the thoughts that grew out of this period, for they are particularly germane to us today. Some priests or ministers call this a preaching series. The topic is usually broad in scope and too complex to talk about in just one ten-minute sermon. So instead of presenting you with a thirty-minute sermon today, enticing as that may be, I've broken this topic into three parts.

Much of our classical, systematic theology today has been derived from Anselm, who lived during the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries. For him, theology was about faith seeking understanding. Anselm articulated this by saying, "Because I believe, I seek to understand." Faith is different from intellectual thought; it has an inner drive to articulate itself. There really is not a simple or pure faith outside of articulation. Faith is something we are driven to talk about.

Theologians during the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century began looking at theology as a type of dialogue between God and humanity. One of these theologians was John Macquarrie who was instrumental in developing liberal theology. Karl Barth countered with a response to Macquarrie, and this movement became known as Neo-orthodoxy. I want to go more into depth of these two movements at a later time, for they have really formed the way that we tend to think about theology today. For the time being, though, I'm mentioning them only because it is in reaction to them that our friends in the 70's were reacting. While Macquarrie and Barth were both reacting to the theology from the eighteenth century Enlightenment, they were using the modern intellectual mind as the theologian's dialogue partner. This was very heady stuff they were talking about, and frankly not much discussed outside of academia, and certainly not in churches. Human experience and how it related to one's faith was one of the major topics of discussion. The problem, though, was that they were talking about human experience in a uniform way, as though there were only one, authentic experience. This is obviously false. Each of us has his or her own experience that shapes the way we view things. For example, we might think of the term "family" and think of a dad, a mom, and two kids, all living in perfect harmony, and some people experienced family life in this way. But some of us had a different experience of family. One or both parents might be missing, or if present, they were abusive, and on top of that we can't stand our siblings. Applying our own experiences to something as complex as the Holy Scriptures, we will come up with ways of relating to God that might be quite different from people sitting next to us in church. The new theologians, as I'll call the thinkers of the seventies,

wanted us to see what we generally don't see, for example, the connection of God to "he". For many of us, this connection is so ingrained that we don't question it or see how it might affect our own concepts of the Almighty.

Symbols move us toward things that can't be explained through verbal descriptions, and the Church is chock-full of symbols. How else can we attempt to understand something that is ultimately unknowable? Faith drives us forward, though, seeking an understanding of God. Symbols change over time, and we have to keep finding new ones that better express the inexpressible. And language is the grandest collection of symbols with which we come into contact all the time. Our language is the primary tool that we have to interact with each other, although there are other ways as well, such as art and music. Language is dynamic and always seeking new ways of expressing thoughts.

All of this leads me to the problem that the new theologians, many of whom were women, were addressing. The problem is that the cultural context in which the Bible was written is restrictive and to some alienating. This context from their point of view is patriarchal and androcentric. Let me distinguish between these two terms: patriarchy refers to social institutions and structures. They represent the institutionalized domination of men over women. We see this today in several countries, one of which is Saudi Arabia where women are virtually powerless to do anything on their own without an accompanying man or his permission. Androcentrism means elevating a male perspective to be the primary, genuine, and true perspective. Sadly, this has been the case for most of the time that the Church has been in existence. It's not surprising, then, that several of the new women and liberation theologians were from the Roman Catholic tradition.

So, let's restate the problem. How can the Bible and theology that have been in existence for 2,000 years reflect the experience of those people who have been oppressed for that length of time? These oppressed people include women, racial minorities, and the poor. How is God speaking to them outside of the long-established norms of theology up to this time? Even if you are male and part of the dominate cultural context, this problem applies to you as well. I return to my example of family from before. Perhaps you came from a family with an abusive father. Sprinkled throughout the Bible are references to God the Father. Is your own experience of fatherly characteristics the one that you attribute to Almighty God? I assume not, unless you're talking about the vengeful and wrathful God that is mentioned in parts of the Hebrew Scriptures. The loving, self-sacrificing Father God is not one that you can relate to through your experience with your own father.

What does all this mean, then? Where do we go from here? That's what the new theologians were trying to determine, and there is by no means a consensus among them. Here are some ideas that have been proposed:

First, reverse sexism. This would be eliminating all references to a male God and substituting a female God. The Trinity would become God the Mother, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. God would always be a "she". Some have proposed this as a way of counterbalancing the over-emphasis on a male version of God. We swing the pendulum way over to the other side, then ultimately we can settle on some ground in the middle that would be truly reflective of a God who is neither male nor female.

A second option would be an androgynous God. Gender is irrelevant, and there is no difference between men and women. We can use the words "he" and "she" interchangeably when referring to God. Another way is to never use a pronoun when speaking of God, and that is what several churches have done. For example, you would not say "himself" when referring

to God, but instead “God’s self”. I have used this formulation myself, although I admit it sometimes sounds odd. In one of the forms of the Prayers of the People, there’s a good example of the difficulties involved when trying to remove pronouns. The petition written in our Prayer Book is “I ask your prayers for all who seek God, or a deeper knowledge of him. Pray that they may find and be found by him.” Eliminating the pronouns, we come up with “I ask your prayers for all who seek God, or a deeper knowledge of God. Pray that they may find and be found by God.” It doesn’t flow, does it, and is generally unsatisfactory. By the way, this is one of the petitions that we will use today, although with modifications that I made. Let me know if you have any alternative wordings that are better, because I’d love to use them.

A third option is complementarity. This alternative recognizes that men and women are different, but complementary. There are built-in differences seen in a hierarchical relationship. A way of applying this would be to attribute female characteristics to God when speaking about God’s actions of giving life or birth to her creations, but speak in male terms about God the protector, which has traditionally been a male role. I think it’s easy to see that this can rapidly deteriorate into stereotypes of what men and women are “supposed” to be like, even while trying to eliminate any judgments regarding the relative value of these characteristics.

While there are others, the last option I’d like to mention is mutuality. This is a reaction against androgyny. Instead of trying to eliminate all gender differences, mutuality wants to accept and affirm differences in a context of absolute equality. An example of this is the Trinity. The three parts of the Godhead have different characteristics, but they all function together as one and are interdependent. Putting this concept down on paper, however, is another matter, and I’m sure you can see there might be some difficulties implementing mutuality into an effective, comprehensive discussion of God.

During this first part of my preaching series, I’ve provided a brief description of the historical foundations of systematic theology and the problems that some modern theologians have surfaced regarding their universal applicability. We looked at four options that have been proposed to remedy this deficiency, namely reverse sexism, androgyny, complementarity, and mutuality. One thing I really want to make clear, though, is that even though we’ll be exploring ways of talking about God in non-male terms over the course of the next two Sundays, I’m not trying to do away with the traditions that many of us have grown up with, and that includes the language that we use in worship. I hope that these sermons are the beginning of a dialogue amongst all of us to look at our worship and come to a consensus of what best reflects our communal experience of God here at Faith. As I mentioned when I first came here, I don’t propose to make any substantial liturgical changes without doing the theological reflection with you. This is the beginning of one of many journeys we’ll take together in the hope of bringing God’s reign on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.

by Fr. Kirby M. Smith