

**Overpowering God:
Naming God in Human Power Structures**

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I. Introduction

By giving God a name, any name, are we subjecting God to the power structures of the patriarchal power systems that dominate Christian culture? The naming of God can influence our relationship with God. Using articles by Gail Ramshaw and Elizabeth Achtemeier as a starting point, I will explore how Christians have exerted power over God by assigning gender through language. This paper will look at how Christians have assigned God a specific role that limits our understanding of God's love and creation. I would argue that Christians have limited God and that we need to expand our understanding of God to include many different roles that have no gender assignment. Should we create a new name for God, should we expand our definition of God, or should we leave well enough alone?

II. The arguments of language

The language we use to describe God is full of metaphors and similes. The texts that we use in worship, prayer, and even the Scriptures are loaded with metaphors and similes. This is the language that Gail Ramshaw explores in her search for better names for God¹. While Ramshaw explores the language of metaphors, in the end she decides it is better to keep the language we currently use, because we must call God by some name.

This is where I think Ramshaw falters in her understanding of the power inherent in naming God. Ramshaw relies on Scriptural evidence to determine the naming of God. She accepts that the current nomenclature can strip power away from groups of people, while empowering other groups. But Ramshaw doesn't offer a way out of this difficult

¹ Ramshaw, G. *Reviving sacred speech : the meaning of liturgical language : second thoughts on Christ in sacred speech*

language. She simply advocates for tradition, because she has not found a suitable alternative.

The reliance on, and acceptance of, Scripture as the source of our current language opens our language to misinterpretation. Scripture, we must remember, was written by human beings; specifically, Scripture was written by male scribes. These scribes, or scribal schools, each sought to further different agendas. Male figures dominate the Scriptures because men dominated the system of dissemination. This in turn empowers men over God². Ramshaw has inadvertently advocated for the continued application of power over God.

Elizabeth Achtemeier also relies heavily on Scriptural evidence in her arguments against changing the current language³. Achtemeier asserts that the feminist view of God as both male and female or just female is scripturally flawed. She uses the argument that God is revealed through Scripture to be male and the gender of Christ is the example that she uses to illustrate her view that God is male. Her claim is that because Jesus calls out at his death to his father, that God must be male. In supporting this reasoning, Achtemeier is accepting the power being applied to God by humans.

III. Overpowering God

When humans claim to know the name of God, we overpower God by subjecting God to our own gender biases by creating a name for God. In the past, humans have exerted this power over God and handed that power down through the ages. Scripture tells that God revealed the names that we currently use for God to men. These men, in turn, became powerful leaders in a patriarchal system because of the knowledge they

² I will further explain this later in the paper.

³ Achtemeier, E. "Exchanging God for "No Gods": A Discussion of Female Language for God" from *Speaking the Christian God: the Holy Trinity and the challenge of feminism*

were given by God. The 'true' name of God could be anything, but Moses, Abraham, and Jesus, each had reasons for asserting that God is male. The position of power attained by Moses and Abraham may not have been respected by their followers if it had been revealed that they were sent by a female God. By saying that God has a male gendered name, Moses, Abraham, and the scribes that told their stories, maintained the power structure that kept them in power.

The death cries of Jesus to his father are accurate in the Gospel of Luke⁴. Jesus had an earthly mother and a heavenly father. His mother did not send him on his mission of preaching, it was his heavenly parent; his father. In this case, God was the father of Jesus. The authors of the New Testament saw this as a confirmation that God was male because they had already been taught that God was male. They did not see that they had misinterpreted Jesus' words. They could not see that they were applying power over God by interpreting the words of Christ without looking at who Jesus was as a human. The authors of scripture lived in a patriarchal system and used their interpretation of scripture as a way of maintaining their own positions of power by asserting that God is a male.

Earlier, I alluded to the dominance of male figures in Scripture because of the male system of dissemination and that this empowers men over God. Because men have decided that God is a male, they have used their own power over God. We, as humans, were given the power to name everything on the earth, in the seas, and in the air⁵. We were never given providence to name God. Though the name of God has been revealed through Scripture, it has only been revealed to men. This revelation gives men power and men have taken that power and, in turn, used it to exercise power over God.

⁴ Luke 23:46

⁵ Genesis 1:26-31 (paraphrased)

IV. My own thoughts

Ramshaw asserts that “God has no gender”⁶. I do not agree with this view, as it still exerts power over God and has no basis in Scripture⁷. I believe that God is male and female. This statement can be supported by evidence found in Genesis 1:27⁸. Although this particular passage asserts that God is male, it also asserts that God created men and women simultaneously. If men and women were created at the same time in God’s image, then it would follow that God is both male and female. This is further supported by the creation story found in Genesis 1. God created the universe and all that fills it. Since men and women are both required in order to create new life, it would follow that the only way God would be able to create life is if God is both female and male.

So God is both female and male. What do we call God that reflects these two aspects of life? Ramshaw advocates “continuing to search for language in which we can name Christ as God without implying that God is Male.”⁹ While I agree with this view, I disagree with the continued use of male dominated language. There are ways to describe God, even the triune God, without using male dominated language¹⁰. A more accurate description of the Trinity would be Creator, Redeemer, and Strengthener instead of Father, Son and Holy Spirit¹¹. There are many other names that could be used that would not presume to reveal the gender of God.

⁶ Ramshaw, G. *Reviving sacred speech*, 2000, p.61.

⁷ Scripture is an over-riding concern for Ramshaw. It is remarkable that in this instance, Ramshaw chooses to ignore this large part of her theology.

⁸ Genesis 1:27 - So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

⁹ Ramshaw, G. *Reviving Sacred Speech*, 2000, p.63-64.

¹⁰ Ramshaw approaches this idea, but falls back on the names that firmly established in modern Christian traditions.

¹¹ Ramshaw avoids these titles out fear that the Church would reject them.

History has shown us that time, education, and focus will allow the Church to adopt new thinking in regards to theological and linguistic changes¹². The Christian Church is capable of making changes to the ways in which it names God; we just need time to instill these changes.

VI. Conclusion/More questions?

Should we create a new name for God, or should we expand our definition of God? Within her text supporting the continued use of the current language, Ramshaw offers a clear reason to abandon male dominated language. She writes that “because words change in meaning, sacred speech requires careful catechesis lest the tradition become unrecognizable before our ears.”¹³ In this regard I agree with her. We should be careful when changing our language surrounding the sacred. This, however, does not mean that we should hold onto a language that no longer accurately professes our beliefs. This is especially true when language subjects God to a human power structure and human whims.

By giving God a name, any name, we are subjecting God to the power structures that are present in the patriarchal power systems that dominate Christian culture. How we name God is just as important as how we worship God. Gail Ramshaw and Elizabeth Achtemeier came to similar conclusions regarding the naming of God, though from very different directions. We, as humans, have assumed a great deal of power in our naming of God. In the process, we have limited our ability to understand God and God’s love.

¹² Green, G. “The Gender of God and the Theology of Metaphor” from *Speaking the Christian God: the Holy Trinity and the challenge of feminism*, p.44. Green refers to the work of Jon Levenson and the appeals to the Bible by pro-slavery and anti-slavery theologians in the nineteenth century.

¹³ Ramshaw, G. *Reviving Sacred Speech*, 2000, p.48.

Therefore, two central questions remain. Should we create a new name for God, should we expand our definition of God, or should we leave well enough alone? And what do we call God without presuming power over God? I hope that I have begun to answer these questions in this paper. By using Gail Ramshaw's work with metaphors, we can create new names for God. While I don't claim to have the final answer to the question; I hope that I have at least been able to shed light on an aspect of the naming of God that has been largely ignored.

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