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Gender as a divine attribute

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Abstract: **It is standard within the Christian tradition to characterize God in predominantly masculine terms. Let 'traditionalism' refer to the view that this pattern of characterization is theologically mandatory. In this article, I seek to undercut the main motivations for traditionalism by showing that it is not more *accurate* to characterize God as masculine rather than feminine (or vice versa). The novelty of my argument lies in the fact that it presupposes neither theological anti-realism nor a robust doctrine of divine transcendence, but instead rests heavy theoretical weight on the *imago Dei* doctrine and the method of perfect-being theology. The article closes by examining the implications of the article's main argument for the moral and liturgical propriety of characterizing God in predominantly masculine terms.**

Traditional Christian theology maintains that God created human beings, male and female, in the divine image. But the traditional pattern of characterizing God in scripture, authoritative confessions and creeds, and much of Christian theology throughout the centuries seems predicated on the assumption that God is masculine. God is traditionally referred to as 'he' and as 'our heavenly Father', for example; and even the figurative characterizations in scripture and elsewhere (e.g. as the faithful husband of wayward Israel) are predominantly masculine. By virtue of the relationship between masculinity and maleness, this pattern might seem to suggest that males bear the image of God to a greater degree than females, that they are more fit to represent God, and that whatever traits contribute to making someone masculine are somehow more divine than whatever traits contribute to making someone feminine. So many traditionalists have thought; so many feminists have objected.

There is a persuasive case to be made for the conclusion that the traditional pattern of characterizing God in predominantly masculine terms has been harmful to women.[1] To the extent that it encourages a false view of their own superiority, and enables various kinds of oppressive behaviour, there is also a case to be made for the conclusion that it has been harmful to men.[2] There is,

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furthermore, good reason to think that this harmful state of affairs is at least partly a result of the fact that women's voices have largely been excluded from the theological conversations that have shaped the tradition.[3] In the face of such considerations, it is an urgent question whether the traditional pattern of characterizing God in predominantly masculine terms is *theologically mandatory*. That is to say, it is an urgent question whether we are somehow morally or rationally (in the epistemic sense) required to uphold and persist in the traditional pattern, or whether doing so is somehow liturgically important. If the answer is 'no', then the traditional pattern is theologically optional.

Some, to be sure, have suggested that the harms done by the traditional pattern are overstated.[4] But even if that were true, it is undeniable that many people *believe* that women have been and continued to be harmed by the traditional pattern, and that Christendom's failure to adopt more gender-inclusive ways of speaking about God has presented such people with serious, ongoing obstacles to faith and to comfortable participation in their own religious communities. This fact alone constitutes reason to adopt more inclusive ways of characterizing God, unless there is some reason for thinking that the traditional pattern is theologically mandatory. But what reason could there be? Why endorse *traditionalism*, the view that the pattern of characterizing God in predominantly masculine terms *is* theologically mandatory, rather than *inclusivism*, the view that feminine characterizations of God are just as legitimate as masculine ones?

There is no explicit biblical affirmation of traditionalism. Nor can traditionalism be defended by appeal to facts about God's body; for, incarnational considerations aside, the Christian tradition speaks virtually unanimously against the idea that God has a male or female body. Consequently, defences of traditionalism tend to argue either for the singular theological *fittingness* of masculine characterizations of God, or for the conclusion that the biblical pattern of characterization indicates that God *wants* to be characterized in predominantly masculine terms. Both kinds of argument would be undercut, however, if it could be shown that masculine characterizations of God are no more metaphysically accurate than feminine ones. Given the perceived harms of characterizing God in predominantly masculine terms, why would a perfectly loving God insist on being characterized in this way if feminine characterizations are equally accurate? Why would it be theologically fitting to continue in a metaphysically misleading pattern of characterization that raises obstacles to faith and the religious life? It is hard to see good answers to these questions. Consequently, in defending the claim that masculine characterizations of God are no more (or less) accurate than feminine ones, I take myself to be arguing against the best available underpinning for traditionalism.

I am hardly the first to oppose the claim that masculine characterizations of God are more accurate than the alternatives. One of the main projects of so-called second-wave feminist theology in the 1980s and early 1990s was the idoloclastic attempt to show that the traditional Judaeo-Christian concept of God as masculine

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is a pernicious misrepresentation of God.[5] But, broadly speaking, the parties to the feminist side of the debate offered just two main strategies for defending the inclusivist position.[6] Some dismissed the traditional concept of God as an idolatrous invention, a mere projection onto the divine of male-centric values and fantasies.[7] Others appealed to divine transcendence. A suitably strong theology of transcendence will imply that relatively few (if any) characterizations of God are strictly metaphysically accurate, thus making it extremely difficult to support the view that masculine characterizations are metaphysically privileged.[8] On both ways of thinking, the traditional pattern of characterization is not due to its greater metaphysical accuracy but rather to the unjust suppression of feminine characterizations by sinful men in power speaking and writing under the influence of entrenched biases against women.

Feminists have largely moved on from these particular debates, in part because some of the underlying assumptions that helped determine the contours of the debates (e.g. that sex and gender are binary categories, or that gender supervenes on biological and psychological traits) are now more contested than they previously were. Even so, most inclusivists seem content with some variation on one of the two strategies I have just described. Most, that is, except for those working in the analytic tradition of philosophy. As is well known, analytic theologians tend to have very little sympathy either for projectionism or for strong theologies of divine transcendence. What then have they said about the feminist critique of the traditional concept of God? Remarkably little. Although frequently and in various ways targeted by inclusivists for uncritically embracing a masculine conception of God, those working in the analytic tradition have mostly opted simply to ignore the critique rather than to explore their own distinctive resources for addressing it. As a result, there is now a significant gap in the literature. What might one say if one is sympathetic towards feminist concerns about traditionalism but unsympathetic towards projectionism and strong theologies of transcendence? This is the question that animates the present article.

My point of departure is the following insight from Elizabeth Johnson's landmark book, *She Who Is*: 'If women are created in the image of God, then God can be spoken of in female metaphors in as full and limited a way as God is imaged in male ones' (Johnson (1993), 54). Out of context, the remark seems to suggest that, on Johnson's view, the primary rationale for inclusivism is the *imago Dei* doctrine. In fact, however, this is *not* the primary rationale that we find in the rest of *She Who Is*. Although the *imago Dei* doctrine certainly plays a role in her overall case, the metaphysical underpinning for her brand of inclusivism is, as I have already noted, the doctrine of divine transcendence.[9] My own goal in the present article is to provide metaphysical underpinning for inclusivism that dispenses with the latter doctrine and rests more theoretical weight on the *imago Dei* doctrine.

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The main argument summarized

In the following sections, I argue from a particular understanding of the *imago Dei* doctrine (elaborated below) via the method of perfect being theology for the conclusion that masculine characterizations of God are no more or less accurate than feminine ones. To say that one way of characterizing God is more accurate than another is just to say that it comes closer to telling the straightforward, literal truth about what God is really like (intrinsically *or* extrinsically, essentially *or* contingently). Accuracy can, of course, come apart from legitimacy, permissibility, or propriety. It doesn't automatically follow from the fact that masculine and feminine characterizations come equally close to telling the truth about God that it is morally permissible or liturgically appropriate to characterize God in feminine terms. Accuracy is a matter of metaphysics; propriety is a matter of what is overall most fitting in light not only of what we know about the relevant metaphysics but also of what we know about God's preferences, likely harms and benefits to human beings and their relationships with God, and so on. Further premises, therefore, would be required to establish inclusivism, which asserts not the equal *accuracy* but rather the equal *propriety* of characterizing God in feminine terms. From the remainder of this section up until the beginning of the article's closing section, I shall be concerned with matters of metaphysical accuracy. In addressing these issues, I take myself indirectly to be addressing the question whether we are *rationally* required to characterize God in predominantly masculine terms. In so far as we can see that it is not most *accurate* to do so, we are not rationally required to do so. I then turn to consider questions about the moral and liturgical propriety of feminine characterizations of God in the final section of the article.

My main argument is simple. (i) God is most accurately characterized as masculine (say) only if God is masculine and God is not equally feminine. However, so I shall argue, (ii) God is masculine or feminine only if God is *equally* masculine and feminine. Therefore, (iii) God is not most accurately characterized as masculine. By the same reasoning, *mutatis mutandis*, God is not most accurately characterized as feminine (or as belonging to any other gender).

I take the first premise of this argument to be obviously true. Thus, my remarks in what follows shall focus on defending the second premise. Another way of stating that second premise is to say that *gender is a divine attribute only if God belongs equally to both genders.* I shall use the term *genderism* to refer to the negation of that premise, i.e. to the following thesis: gender is a divine attribute (i.e. God has gender) and God is either *more* masculine than feminine, or vice versa. My defence of premise (ii) shall consist in an argument for the conclusion that genderism is false. As I have indicated, my argument rests on what I take to be obvious implications of the thesis that women, like men, are created in the image of God.[10]

Does anybody in fact endorse genderism? Initially, one might have doubts. It is commonly said that the general consensus in the Christian tradition is and always

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has been that God is beyond gender; it is also, admittedly, rather difficult to find theologians who *clearly* endorse genderism. However, careful attention to the texts commonly adduced as evidence of consensus that God is beyond *gender* reveals that those texts in fact only support the thesis that there has been consensus that God is beyond *sex*. (Cf. Cooper (1998), 168–169.) Moreover, even in the absence of explicit theological affirmations of genderism, the history of iconography – in which God and each person of the trinity are *overwhelmingly* regularly depicted as male – bears strong testimony to the fact that masculine genderism has, on some level, been the dominant view throughout church history.[11] Finally, although it is indeed hard to find explicit affirmations of genderism as I have formulated it, it is easy to find affirmations of claims close enough in the neighbourhood. Robert Jenson (1992), for example, insists that there are neither linguistic nor metaphysical reasons for thinking that Jesus' address of God as 'Father' is non-literal, and that the Church decided during the fourth-century Arian controversies that this mode of address is both non-literal and absolutely to be preferred over feminine or neutral forms of address (*ibid.*, 105).[12] Again, this is not an explicit affirmation of genderism; but it is a nearly explicit affirmation of the claim that God is *literally* our Father *rather* than our Mother or our beyond-gender Parent. It seems hardly a stretch, then, to say that Jenson affirms genderism.[13]

The rest of the article unfolds as follows. In the next section, I lay out some of my assumptions about gender and the *imago Dei* doctrine that are needed to understand my argument against genderism. In the following section, I present that argument. Then, in the closing section, I consider whether my argument against genderism has negative implications for the moral and liturgical propriety of characterizing God exclusively or predominantly in masculine terms.

Gender and the *imago Dei*

In accord with conventions that are presently fairly standard, I use the terms 'male' and 'female' when talking about sex, and 'masculine', 'feminine', 'man', and 'woman' when talking about gender. Furthermore, I do not presume that gender necessarily correlates with sex. Accordingly, my terminology allows that there might be male women and female men. It also allows that someone might be a man or woman, masculine or feminine, without being either male or female. I shall generally try to remain neutral on the metaphysics of sex and gender; but for convenience, I will talk as if they are binary categories and as if sex is not socially constructed whereas gender might be. Nothing in my argument depends on these choices, both of which are now contentious.[14]

There seem to be two different (but not mutually exclusive) things that one might mean by saying that a characterization of someone is gendered, i.e. masculine or feminine. First, one might mean that it involves the use of a pronoun or predicate that can be literally applied only to members of a particular gender. For

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example, it is a conceptual truth that the pronoun 'he' and predicates like 'is a father' or 'is a king' apply literally only to men. (Some will say that they apply literally only to males; but I imagine one would say this only if one thought that only males could be men.) I'll refer to characterizations that use pronouns and predicates like this as *strongly gendered*.

Second, one might mean that the characterization involves the application of a predicate that stereotypically applies to members of just one gender, even though it can be literally applied to members of both genders. Predicates like this I'll refer to as *weakly gendered*. In the literature, for example, we find claims to the effect that characterizations of God as powerful and *a se* are *masculine*, whereas characterizations of God as nurturing or as brooding over God's children are *feminine*. Those who make such claims do not generally mean to suggest (e.g.) that being powerful is a sufficient condition for being a man, or that being nurturing is a sufficient condition for being a woman. Rather, their view seems to be that these predicates are gendered by virtue of the stereotypes associated with each gender.[15]

Both strongly and weakly gendered characterizations have been seen to be problematic. Strongly masculine characterizations of God obscure (or perhaps even tacitly deny) that traits definitive or stereotypical of womanhood reflect the image of God. The same is true of weakly masculine characterizations when their use greatly overshadows the use of weakly feminine ones. Mary Daly famously said that: 'If God is male, then the male is God' (Daly (1973), 19). By extension, we might also say that if God is (exclusively or predominantly) *masculine*, then the traits that are definitive or stereotypical of masculinity are more divine than those definitive or stereotypical of femininity. But, according to the second-wave feminist critiques, it is precisely this thought, together with the fact that gender typically (even if not uniformly) tracks sex, that has led to the subordination of females within the Christian tradition.

So much for preliminary terminological points. Let me now highlight two assumptions. First, I assume that sex is not a divine attribute: God is neither male nor female. (The incarnate Christ was male; but presumably his maleness is no more a divine attribute than his tallness, his hairiness, his musculature, etc.) Accordingly, I also assume that in offering a gendered characterization of God, one does not thereby commit oneself to the claim that God has, or is even *imagined* to have, male or female bodily features. The first assumption I take to be obviously true; the second is a natural correlate of the first.

Finally, I want to make some brief remarks on how I understand the version of the *imago Dei* thesis on which my arguments depend. There are various ways of interpreting the claim that women and men equally are created in the image of God, some of which put it in conflict with theories about gender that ought to be compatible with it. For example, one might read it as saying that some people have been created as women, others as men, and the intrinsic properties that make someone a woman are no less a part of the divine image than those

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that make someone a man. On that reading, one cannot affirm the equality thesis while also affirming (e.g.) that gender is a social construction, or that gender membership reflects something about where one stands in the structure of power and oppression within one's society.[16] But surely that is a bad result. The equality thesis ought to conflict with theories according to which some people *by virtue of their gender* bear the divine image to a greater degree than people of a different gender. It should not, however, necessarily conflict with theories according to which gender is socially constructed. Nor should it necessarily conflict with theories according to which gender is determined more by social position than by personality and behavioural dispositions – especially since the latter traits are clearly more relevant to the divine image, and were the sorts of traits primarily in view in the debates of the 1980s and early 1990s.

In light of all of this, I shall understand the equality thesis to be equivalent to the following claim: All human beings are created equally in the image of God; and if mental and behavioural characteristics contribute at all to gender membership, then the ones that contribute to making someone a woman are no more or less relevant to her bearing the image of God than those that contribute to making someone a man. I hope, too, that in showing how one might recast the equality thesis in such a way as to eradicate certain contested assumptions about gender, I will have gestured toward ways of reformulating any other claims in this article that might unintentionally presuppose contested theses about gender.

In the next section, I provide an argument against genderism. If genderism is false, the following disjunction is true: *gender is not a divine attribute* or *God belongs equally to both genders*. The first disjunct implies that strongly gendered terms do not literally apply to God – God transcends gender categories. Importantly, however, it does not follow from this that *weakly gendered* terms and predicates have no literal application to God. Thus, even if predicates like 'is *a se*' or 'is nurturing' are weakly gendered, one can still coherently affirm that gender is not a divine attribute. Likewise, one can affirm that gender is not a divine attribute while still maintaining that *strongly gendered* pronouns or predicates have an important place in our theology. For, after all, such terms might be applicable to God, and the relevant figures of speech might be theologically important. I affirm with scripture and the oldest creeds of Christendom that God is my *heavenly Father*. Likewise, I can agree with Julian of Norwich that 'as truly as God is our Father, so truly is God our Mother.'[17] Both claims are theologically important; both claims express truths. And this is so even if both are metaphors.

The argument against genderism

Every divine attribute is such that God has it either essentially (i.e. of necessity) or contingently. Every divine attribute is furthermore either intrinsic to God or extrinsic. Thus, every divine attribute falls into one of the following mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive categories: (i) essential intrinsic, (ii) essential extrinsic,

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(iii) contingent intrinsic, or (iv) contingent extrinsic.[18] Those who endorse the doctrine of divine simplicity, according to which God is identical to God's attributes, will insist that God has no attributes outside the first category. Those who reject divine simplicity and endorse an abundant theory of properties have room in their ontology for divine attributes that fall into some of the other categories.[19]

In the argument that follows, I make three further assumptions. First, in order to give my argument widest scope, I assume that the doctrine of divine simplicity is false and that every non-paradoxical predicate that has a literal meaning corresponds to an attribute.[20] I take it that we can generally tell which predicates are meaningful; and a predicate has a *literal* meaning if, and only if, it is not irreducibly figurative. A predicate F is paradoxical iff, on the assumption that F is a meaningful predicate, there is something x such that $Fx \equiv \neg Fx$. (For example, on the assumption that *is not a predicate that applies to itself* is a meaningful predicate, it is paradoxical.) Note that I am not assuming that paradoxical predicates *do not* correspond to properties; I simply do not wish to presuppose that they *do*.

Second, I assume that the term 'divine attribute' refers only to attributes had by at least one of the three persons of the trinity independently of the incarnation. There is no question that Jesus of Nazareth was male; there can be little question that he was also masculine. But just as we would not want to say, on the grounds that Jesus was bearded (if indeed he was), that *being bearded* or *being embodied* is a divine attribute, so too we should not want to say simply on the grounds that Jesus was a man that *being masculine* is a divine attribute.[21]

Third, I assume that strongly gendered terms (either pronouns or predicates) literally apply to God only if God has an attribute corresponding to a strongly gendered predicate.

With these assumptions in hand, I shall argue for each of the following three premises:

P1. Strongly gendered attributes are among God's essential attributes only if God belongs equally to both genders.
P2. The category of contingent intrinsic divine attributes is empty.
P3. Strongly gendered attributes are among God's contingent extrinsic attributes only if God belongs equally to both genders.

The three premises exhaust the four categories of divine attribute; thus, if all three are true, it follows that God has strongly gendered attributes only if God belongs equally to both genders. I take this conclusion to be equivalent to the thesis that genderism is false.

Let us begin with P1. The first step is to argue that no strongly gendered attribute is essential to *all three* persons of the trinity unless each person is *equally* masculine and feminine. This conclusion is delivered in two ways by the method of perfect being theology deployed under the assumption that it is neither better to be masculine than feminine nor better to be feminine than masculine. Here

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again the conviction that women and men equally are created in the image of God is crucial; for it is precisely that conviction that provides theological underpinning for the view that it is neither better to be masculine than feminine nor better to be feminine than masculine.

Here is the first way: it seems plausible that, for every attribute *A* that is essential to all three persons of the trinity, it is intrinsically better to be *A* than not-*A*.[22] The principle seems clearly to be true for attributes other than strongly gendered ones; thus it seems most sensible to say that it holds of strongly gendered attributes as well. But it is not intrinsically better to be masculine than to be feminine, or vice versa; thus, no strongly gendered attribute is essential to *all three persons* of the trinity unless each person is equally masculine and feminine.

One might object: every member of the trinity has essentially the attribute *not being identical to the number* 2. But it seems neither better to have that attribute nor better to lack it. (The number 3 has that attribute whereas the number 2 lacks it, but neither number is thereby better than the other.) Thus, there seems to be reason to reject my principle that for every attribute that is essential to all three persons, it is better to have the attribute than to lack it. I reply as follows: it *is* intrinsically better to be distinct from the number 2 than to be identical to the number 2; but the reason we don't think that the number 3 is thereby better than the number 2 is simply that it is *also* better to lack the property *being identical to the number* 3 than to have it. None of this implies that it is *bad* to be identical to the number 2 or to the number 3, just that something is intrinsically better if it is distinct from them (and from all other numbers, and, indeed, from anything else besides God).

Here is the second way to arrive at the conclusion that no strongly gendered attribute is essential to all three persons of the trinity unless each person is equally masculine and feminine: under the method of perfect being theology, the recipe for determining the essential divine attributes is (roughly) to sort the attributes we know of into two categories – *great-making properties*, and *other properties*. The divine attributes, then, comprise the best possible array of mutually compatible great-making properties. But, under the assumption that it is not better to be masculine than to be feminine, or vice versa (together with the assumption that there is no hybrid option), we can readily see that strongly masculine attributes belong in the category of *great-making properties* only if *strongly feminine* attributes do. *A fortiori*, strongly masculine attributes belong in the best possible array of such properties only if strongly feminine ones do.

It follows, then, that at least one person of the trinity is essentially masculine only if at least one person of the trinity is essentially feminine; and at least one is essentially feminine only if at least one is essentially masculine. For suppose every person of the trinity were masculine. If being masculine and being feminine are equally great-making properties, then God would have been no better or worse had every person of the trinity been feminine. But then God does not have the *greatest* possible array of compatible great-making properties,

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contrary to the hypothesis of perfect being theology. To avoid this consequence, one of the following must be true: (a) at least one person of the trinity is masculine whereas at least one *other* is feminine; (b) all persons of the trinity are *both* masculine and feminine; or (c) no person of the trinity is either masculine or feminine.

Suppose it turns out that *two* persons of the trinity (Father and Son, presumably) are masculine whereas only *one* person of the trinity is feminine,[23] and suppose that each divine person's gender is essential to him or her. In that case, does it follow that God is more masculine than feminine? In a word, no. This for two reasons.

First, and in general, a claim of the form 'God is more F than G' is true only if (a) every person of the Trinity is more F than G; (b) the divine nature is more F than G; or (c) *the trinity as a whole* is more F than G. Where *masculine* and *feminine* are substituted for F and G, (a) and (b) are ruled out by the *imago Dei* doctrine. If every person of the trinity were more masculine than feminine, or if the divine nature were more masculine than feminine, men and women would clearly not be *equally* created as such in the image of God – men as such would be greater image-bearers than women. And it seems that (c) is satisfied only when F and G are properties had by all three persons. For, after all, we don't say (e.g.) that *God* is more discarnate than incarnate, more non-indwelling believers than indwelling believers, less distinct from Father and Son than identical to Father or Son, etc. But we have already established that if all three persons of the trinity are masculine, all are equally feminine (and vice versa). Thus, on the supposition that two members of the trinity are essentially masculine and one is essentially feminine, it is still not the case that God is more masculine than feminine.

Second, and perhaps more importantly, to say that *God* is more masculine than feminine when two divine persons are masculine and one is feminine is equivalent to saying that the term 'masculine' more aptly describes the Godhead – more adequately gets at what *God really is* – than the term 'feminine'. But to say *this*, in turn, is to subordinate the feminine person of the trinity – to say that she is somehow less real, or less really God, than the other persons. But, of course, this is just the heresy of subordinationism; it is not an option for Christian theology. If every person of the trinity were more masculine than feminine, men and women as such would not be *equally* created in the image of God – men would be greater image-bearers than women. Thus, I conclude that P1 is true.

P2 says that the category of contingent *intrinsic* divine attributes is empty. I reach this conclusion as follows. Suppose (for *reductio*) that God is intrinsically F but might have been intrinsically G, where being intrinsically G implies not being intrinsically F, and vice versa. Now, if God were G, then God would be better, worse, or neither better nor worse than God in fact is. If God would be better by virtue of being G, then God is not perfect; if God would be worse by virtue of being G, then God might not have been perfect. But God is necessarily

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perfect. Thus, being G is neither better nor worse than being F. But if that is true, then it seems to be a matter of sheer happenstance whether God is F or G. If intrinsic features of the divine nature depend on the divine will, then (since it is neither better nor worse to be G rather than F) there is no explanation in the divine will for why God is F rather than G; and divine aseity implies that there is no explanation *outside* God for God's intrinsic attributes. Thus, it is sheer happenstance that God is F rather than G; and, if so, then God's being F rather than G is wholly independent of God's will. But none of God's intrinsic features is *wholly* independent of God's will – this, too, is a consequence of divine aseity. Thus, it is not sheer happenstance that God is F rather than G. (Contradiction.)

If this argument is sound, it follows that God has no contingent intrinsic values or desires. If that is right, then one might think that either God's having the values and desires God has is a contingent extrinsic attribute of God or else God's creative options are severely constrained. The reason is that what God creates plausibly depends upon what God wants and what God values. Thus, if God might have created different things, it seems to follow that God might have wanted or valued different things, from which it seems to follow that God's having the values and desires God has is a contingent matter. So, if God has no contingent *intrinsic* values and desires, and if God might have created different things, then it must be a contingent extrinsic matter what God desires and values. The latter conclusion seems incompatible with divine aseity; for it seems to imply that divine desires and values – and hence perhaps also divine goodness – depends somehow on factors external to God. But denying that God might have created different things seems to raise problems for a robust understanding of divine freedom. So we might seem to face a terrible dilemma. But I reject the initial disjunction. Suppose God's values and desires are intrinsic. Nevertheless, they might (for all we know) be conditional on how certain matters of chance turn out; and God might (for all we know) necessarily value leaving certain matters – the truth values of counterfactuals of creaturely freedom for example, or the movements of fundamental particles – to chance. If that is right, then there is room to say that God might have created different things, and this despite the fact that divine values and desires are intrinsic.

Finally, I turn to P3: God has strongly gendered *contingent extrinsic* attributes only if God belongs equally to both genders. (Other examples of contingent extrinsic attributes might include *being worshipped by Paul* or *being the creator of the Milky Way galaxy*.) Many theories of gender maintain that gender is extrinsic by virtue of being at least partly socially constructed. Moreover, any credible theory of gender according to which gender is both extrinsic and potentially a divine attribute will maintain that a person's gender depends in part upon some combination of outwardly directed beliefs and desires, behavioural dispositions, or observed behaviour towards others. If gender depended *entirely* upon internal and internally directed mental states and behaviours, it is hard to see why it would not be intrinsic; and if it did not depend at all upon beliefs, desires, behavioural

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dispositions, or actual behaviours, then it is hard to see how it could possibly be an attribute of a disembodied personal God.

Given all this, it is easy to see why P3 is true. We have seen that God has no strongly gendered *intrinsic* attributes; likewise, God has no strongly gendered *essential* attributes. The question, then, is whether we have reason to think that there is anything about God's beliefs and desires or about the social significance of God's observable behaviour that would ground the literal application of strongly masculine terms to God but not strongly feminine ones, or vice versa. Scripture seems to characterize God as behaving in ways stereotypical of both genders, and scripture also seems to attribute mental states to God – maternal love and concern, for example – that are appropriately characterized by way of feminine imagery.[24] When theologians like Julian of Norwich apply strongly *feminine* terms to God, the characterizations usually *resonate* with rather than contradict what the Christian tradition seems to affirm about God's beliefs, desires, and behaviour towards creation; and likewise when strongly masculine terms are applied to God. Given all of this, there is good reason to think that either God has no strongly gendered extrinsic attributes at all or that God belongs to both genders.

To say that God belongs to both genders, however, is not yet to say that God belongs *equally* to both genders. Perhaps God belongs to both genders but nevertheless has a preponderance of masculine attributes and therefore counts as *more masculine than feminine*. As noted earlier, however, to say this is to fall foul of the equality thesis. Again: If every person of the trinity were more masculine than feminine, or if the divine nature were more masculine than feminine, or if the trinity as a whole were more masculine than feminine, then men as such would be greater image-bearers than women as such, contrary to the equality thesis. Thus, if gender is extrinsic, either God has no gender, or God belongs equally to both genders.

Implications for traditionalism

In the previous section, I defended the conclusion that God is masculine or feminine only if God is equally masculine and feminine. The only other premise in my main argument is the obvious truth that God is most accurately characterized as masculine only if God is masculine but not equally feminine. Thus, I conclude that it is not the case that God is most accurately characterized as masculine. By the same reasoning, *mutatis mutandis*, it follows that it is not the case that God is most accurately characterized as feminine. In this closing section I want to consider briefly the implications of this conclusion for the moral and liturgical propriety of characterizing God in exclusively or predominantly masculine terms.

The conclusion that God is not most accurately characterized as masculine poses a serious challenge to traditionalists who maintain that God *ought* to be characterized in predominantly masculine terms. The challenge is to explain why this should be so. The most natural defence would appeal to the idea that privileging masculine characterizations somehow gives us special insight into the

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divine nature that would be lost if feminine characterizations came to enjoy an equal place in our theology and liturgical practice. But it is hard to maintain this view while at the same time admitting that characterizing God in predominantly masculine terms is *metaphysically misleading*. The question for the traditionalist, then, comes to this: why think that masculine characterizations are to be preferred, *given* that preferring masculine characterizations is apt to mislead people about God's attributes?

Broadly speaking, I see only two responses to this question that have any hope of being viable. First, one might think that the risks (in terms of harm to human beings in general, or to the furtherance of what we reasonably take to be God's goals for creation) of de-privileging masculine characterizations of God outweigh the risks of continuing to privilege them. At best, I think, we have no reason to think that this claim is true; and feminists have, in effect, been arguing for quite some time now that the claim is resoundingly false. Second, one might think that, wholly independently of considerations about harm and (again) *despite* the fact that it would be metaphysically misleading, God simply *wants* to be characterized by human beings more in masculine terms than feminine ones. This seems to be the position of John Cooper (1998), and perhaps there is some historical precedent for it as well.[25] In the next several paragraphs I will explain why I think his defence of that view is a failure.

Three chapters of Cooper's *Our Father in Heaven* are devoted to examining the 'biblical pattern' of representation of God and establishing the claim that the 'only reasonable conclusion' one might draw from that pattern is that 'Scripture intends to portray God as a masculine person' (*ibid.*, 114). His argument for this conclusion rests mainly on two premises: (i) all proper names, basic titles, and common nouns that name God are masculine; and (ii) these forms of speech are to be privileged over mere 'figures of speech' in determining what the authors (human and divine) intend to convey about what sorts of gendered terms are appropriately applied to God. I won't contest the first premise; and I need not contest the part of the second premise that says that proper names, basic titles, and common nouns are to be privileged over mere figures of speech in determining what the *human* authors of scripture intend to convey about divine gender. The salient question is whether the absolute prevalence of masculine names, titles, and common nouns indicates anything about the *divine* will.

Cooper is explicit that it does indicate the divine will. After arguing (against some feminist authors) that the masculine portrayals of God in scripture were not *necessary* in order to accommodate the beliefs and values entrenched in ancient cultures, Cooper writes:

> The fact that God could easily have chosen a gender-inclusive self-presentation … and did not do so is a strong reason for supposing that the exclusively masculine language for God in Scripture is not merely a temporary accommodation. *In fact it is a good indication that God is not interested in promoting gender-inclusive language for himself.* (*ibid.*, 153, emphasis added)

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At the same time, however, he affirms – emphatically, and multiple times – that 'ontologically, God is genderless' (*ibid.*, 169, n. 3). But he thinks that this fact is ultimately not relevant to the debate about how God is (morally and liturgically) appropriately characterized. Thus, after noting that the claim that God transcends gender is often taken to be a 'key theological ground for the doctrine that God has no gender and thus for dealing with the Bible's masculine language for God', he writes: 'This move [is not consistent with Scripture and] in effect makes a theological-philosophical conclusion about God's nature more determinative of Christian language than the text and teaching of the Bible' (*ibid.*, 168).[26] He goes on later to say that the doctrine that God is beyond gender 'is not stated in Scripture' and that, although it 'has a substantial biblical basis ... its derivation involves some debatable cultural and philosophical assumptions about sex, gender, body, and spirit' (*ibid.*, 183). Thus, he finally concludes:

> I strongly affirm the Christian doctrine that God himself is beyond gender. But I also conclude that because this doctrine is derived from Scripture and relies on extrabiblical assumptions, it ought not to be placed prior to or above Scripture in shaping the language of the Christian faith. (*ibid.*, 184)

The upshot, then, is that scripture – the 'biblical pattern' – testifies against inclusivism; and the testimony of scripture trumps metaphysics as evidence about how God prefers to be characterized.[27]

Many theologians will reject the claim that the testimony of scripture trumps metaphysics as evidence about how God prefers to be characterized. But that is not the route I wish to take. As a general rule, if my considered judgement were ever to be that scripture affirms p whereas my best theory in metaphysics affirms not-p, I would side with scripture and cast aside the metaphysical theory. On this much, I think that Cooper and I agree. But, as one might expect, I have yet to reach the verdict that scripture affirms a proposition that the overall best metaphysical theory denies. Nor have I ever reached the unfortunate conclusion – one that Cooper himself seems to have reached – that there is some proposition that our overall best metaphysical theory affirms but God would prefer for us to ignore in our characterizations of God. The reason, of course, is that my metaphysical theorizing and my interpretation of scripture proceed in dialogue with one another. Theory-building is a holistic process.

The problem with Cooper's argument is that he fails to appreciate the way in which philosophical reasoning is already involved at the level of figuring out what it means to take sides with scripture and to let it serve as evidence for a conclusion. Let us grant that 'the biblical pattern' of reference to God is one which portrays God overwhelmingly in masculine terms. Let us also grant (as seems plausible) that this pattern is prima facie evidence that God wants to be portrayed in overwhelmingly masculine terms. Still, *just like the doctrine that God is beyond gender*, the thesis that God wants to be portrayed in overwhelmingly masculine terms is not at all stated in scripture, but is instead merely derived from scripture with the help of additional, extrabiblical assumptions.

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The question, then, is whether our total evidence – scripture, metaphysics, and whatever other extrabiblical assumptions we might appropriately appeal to in defending our views about how to characterize God – supports the thesis that God prefers to be characterized in predominantly masculine terms *despite the fact that it is metaphysically misleading*. Against Cooper's view, we might first note that the biblical pattern of reference to God is one that applies exclusively Aramaic, Hebrew, and Greek terms to God; but, of course, nobody would claim that this pattern is evidence that God wants to be talked about exclusively in Aramaic, Hebrew, and Greek. The reason, of course, is that we know independently – i.e. at the level of philosophical presupposition – that there is no reason why God *should* want this. There is nothing about God or about the words of Aramaic, Hebrew, and Greek that make them more apt than (say) English words for describing God; and there is no other reason that we can see why God should want to be described only by way of such words. So likewise, we might think, with gendered words. Moreover, we know from scripture that God cares about the truth; God is no deceiver. This, it seems, speaks strongly in favour of a view about how God prefers to be characterized that attributes to God an interest in characterizations that are *not* metaphysically misleading. (This is why I said earlier that the best route for a traditionalist to take is to oppose my arguments for the conclusion that masculine characterizations of God are not more accurate than feminine ones.)

Cooper maintains, in effect, that the moral and liturgical aptness of feminine characterizations of God depends on the proportion of feminine names, basic titles, and common nouns that are applied to God in scripture. He thinks that the fact that *all* of those are masculine is decisive evidence that God has no interest in gender-inclusivism (*ibid*., 114, 153). But, again, this claim is no less an extrabiblical philosophical thesis than its negation, and it is no less an extrabiblical philosophical thesis than those often invoked to support inclusivism (such as the claim that if feminine characterizations are no less *accurate* than masculine ones, then they are likewise no less morally or liturgically appropriate than masculine characterizations). Cooper's 'biblical pattern' is just that – a pattern, and one that is open to interpretation in light of our best overall evidence, philosophical presuppositions included.

I acknowledge that nothing I have said so far demonstrates that Cooper's *conclusion* is false. I have only shown that his argument for that conclusion fails. I also acknowledge that there is something quite natural in taking not just the overall biblical pattern of divine characterization but Jesus' own practice (as reported in scripture) as indicative of a preference on God's part to be characterized in predominantly masculine ways. It is tempting, indeed, to think that sticking with the traditional masculine modes of characterizing God is the *safe* option – safe because it is non-revisionary and is backed by the weight of centuries of practice. I grant that all of this constitutes some reason (partly pragmatic, partly epistemic) for affirming the thesis that God, for unknown reasons, simply prefers to be characterized in masculine terms.

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Still, we must view these considerations in light of the very persuasive arguments for the conclusion that much harm has come from treating masculine characterizations of God as mandatory, and also in light of the very real possibility that implicit bias against women plays a non-trivial role in shaping our judgements about how the biblical pattern of characterization, including what we learn in scripture about Jesus' own practice, is naturally interpreted.[28] We must also recognize that there is nothing at all safe about insisting on a pattern of characterizing God that is ultimately metaphysically misleading (as I think we have very good reason to believe that the traditional pattern is) unless we also have very good reason for thinking that God simply prefers that pattern of characterization. To do that is to risk idolatry. Indeed, it is to risk other sins as well, given that the pattern in question has contributed to the oppression of half the human race, and given that, if we know anything at all from scripture about divine preferences, we know that God cares about justice. Much rides, then, on the claim that God prefers to be portrayed as masculine despite its being metaphysically misleading. As I have argued in this last section of the article, Cooper's case for that claim is a failure; and, for my part, I can see no other convincing reason to endorse it.

Typical defences of inclusivism assume either that the concept of God is a human invention or that divine transcendence precludes the literal application to God of just about any human term, thus making both masculine and feminine characterizations equally appropriate. My goal in this article has been to offer metaphysical underpinning for inclusivism that rests on neither of these assumptions, nor on controversial assumptions about the nature of gender. I have argued that if God is masculine or feminine at all, then God is equally masculine and feminine. I have also provided some reason to think that if this conclusion is true, then it is morally and liturgically appropriate to characterize God in feminine terms – the most salient reason just being that, judging from how God is portrayed in scripture, God seems to prefer not to be characterized in ways that are known to be misleading.[29]

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Notes

1. On this, see Daly (1986), as well as Carr (1988), Johnson (1993), 22–28, and other references therein.
2. Cf. Carr (1988).
3. Cf. Coakley (2013), ch. 1.
4. Cf. Jenson (1992).
5. For detailed discussion of this point, see Raphael (2014).
6. I do not mean to suggest that feminism as such has been monolithically supportive of an unqualified or unmoderated inclusivism. Nor do I mean to suggest that *merely* embracing inclusivism suffices to address feminist concerns about traditional religious language. Soskice (1992) and Coakley (2013) both defend moderated inclusivist positions – inclusivist because they do not think that it is theologically mandatory to portray God in predominantly masculine terms, but moderated because they both think (for different reasons) that the language of divine fatherhood has an important place in Christian liturgy and devotion. Grace Jantzen (1998, ch. 8) has argued that the masculinism inherent in traditional religious language is embedded at the level of methodology: appeals to scripture and theological authorities, assumptions about God's intelligibility, the traditional method of perfect being theology, and, indeed, the entire framework of symbols within which God has traditionally been imagined are all, on her view, rife with masculinist assumptions and imagery. So far as I can tell, nothing I say in the present article conflicts with the views of Soskice and Coakley. However, as will emerge, the arguments of this article do rely on much of the methodology and (I think) the same general symbolic framework that Jantzen is concerned to criticize. Even if she is correct, however, I think that it is both important and novel to show that inclusivism can be supported from within the methodological and symbolic framework that I take for granted.
7. Cf. Ruether (1983), ch. 2; Hampson (1996), ch. 4.
8. Cf. McFague (1987), Carr (1988), and Johnson (1993).
9. See also Johnson (1984).
10. One might wonder whether 1 Cor. 11:7 – which says that '[man] is the image and reflection of God; but woman is the reflection of man' (NRSV translation) – raises trouble (or *should* raise trouble for people who take a high view of the authority and veracity of scripture) for the thesis that men and women are created equally in the image of God. It does not. Genesis 1 is explicit that human beings – *male and female* – were created in the image of God. Commentators divide on the question whether 1 Cor. 11:7

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contradicts Genesis on this score. (Compare, for example, Fee (1987), 515 and Hays (1997), 186.) I cast my lot with those who interpret the passage *in light* of Genesis 1 rather than as contradicting Genesis 1. But the important thing to note is that, for those who take a high view of the authority and veracity of scripture, it is simply not an option to say that Paul is outright contradicting the author(s) of Genesis. Nor, I should think, is it at all plausible to interpret Genesis 1 in light of a superficial reading of 1 Cor. 11:7.

11. Thanks to Sarah Coakley for this point about the iconography. Cf. also Soskice (1992), 83.
12. Jenson's read on the matter is not uncontroversial, however. Soskice, for example, says just the opposite, maintaining that the 'consensus' since the conclusion of the Arian controversy has been that 'calling God "father" is metaphor' (Soskice (1992), 83).
13. Not only does Jenson seem to endorse genderism, but he seems also to think that it has been canonized by the church. However, he does not explain – and I cannot myself see – how one might get from the premise that the church has decided that God is *literally* the Father of Jesus to the conclusion that the church has prohibited addressing God as 'Mother' or 'Parent'. Consequently, I shall not engage this idea further in the sequel. It is perhaps worth noting, however, that it is not at all clear how to square Jenson's views on inclusivism with his view, expressed elsewhere, that 'God is a *decision*' and 'God is a *conversation*' (Jenson (1997), 222, 223). Why it should be theologically *mandatory* to think of any decision or conversation (divine or not) as *masculine* is wholly opaque to me.
14. Cf. Butler (1990), esp. pp. 18–34.
15. Cf., for example, Hampson (1996), 124–125 and Johnson (1993), 68. Note that the relevant stereotypes don't necessarily arise out of or reflect common cultural *beliefs* about men and women. Often traits are characterized by an author as masculine or feminine because their association with men or women, or with their development and socialization, is posited by a developmental theory that is accepted by the author or her interlocutors. (Cf. Chodorow (1978), cited in Johnson (1993).)
16. For example: Sally Haslanger (2000) maintains that a necessary condition for being a woman is having observed or imagined features of one's body play a role in one's systematic subordination and in one's occupying an oppressed social position; and a necessary condition for being a man is having observed or imagined features of one's body play a role in one's being systematically privileged. If that theory is correct, then (a) one's intrinsic characteristics do not by themselves *make* someone a man or a woman, and (b) it is doubtful at best whether those intrinsic characteristics, if any, that *contribute* to making someone a man or a woman equally image the divine (since they would be characteristics that contribute to some people being oppressed and others being oppressors).
17. Julian of Norwich (1978), 296. The concept of the motherhood of God is, of course, not an invention of Julian's, though she was an important figure in the development of that idea. For more on this, see Bynum (1982) and Jantzen (1988), 115–124.
18. Philosophers and theologians sometimes mean different things by the term 'essential property'. For present purposes, p is an essential property of x iff, necessarily, x exists only if x has p; and p is a contingent property of x iff x has p but it is possible that x exist and fail to have p.
19. An abundant theory of properties is one according to which every non-paradoxical predicate that has a literal meaning corresponds to an attribute. (I discuss this idea further in the course of explaining the first assumption of my argument in this section.)
20. As I indicated at the end of the previous paragraph, rejecting this assumption simply restricts the range of attributes that God might have. Accordingly, rejecting it will either make no difference to my argument or will make it easier to defend my conclusion (depending on which part of the assumption one rejects, and for what reasons).
21. It is fairly standard to maintain that Jesus *still* has a body. Jesus' post-resurrection body was clearly transformed; but perhaps it is, nonetheless, a male body. Perhaps Jesus is still masculine too. Even so, just as we would not say on the basis of the belief that Jesus still has a male body that *being embodied* and *being male* are divine attributes, so too we should not say on the basis of the belief that Jesus is still masculine that being masculine is a divine attribute.
22. Note that I am not here presupposing that God has no neutral properties *whatsoever*, but only that God has no neutral properties *essentially*. Suppose God has some attribute A such that it is neither better to be A than not-A nor vice versa. There is, then, no explanation in terms of divine perfection for why God *should* have A rather than not-A (or vice versa); thus, one would expect that if God in fact has A, God *could have* had not-A (and vice versa). Thus, being A is contingent. Later I shall argue that God has no

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contingent *intrinsic* attributes; but this still leaves open the possibility that God has contingent *extrinsic* attributes, and that some of these are neutral.

23. Cf. Congar (1983), 155–164.
24. See Johnson (1993), ch. 5, and Cooper (1998), chs 3–5 for references and discussion (from opposing perspectives).
25. Cf. Widdicombe (1994), 255–260.
26. It is common to suppose that the claim that God *transcends* gender implies that God has no gender. I do not myself endorse this supposition; I would want to leave room for the possibility that God is polygendered. But this is an issue that I cannot pursue in detail here.
27. Note that Cooper's view is apparently *not* that our evidence from scripture *corrects* or *undermines* our metaphysical theory that God is beyond gender. For, as he is at pains to emphasize, he *accepts* the metaphysical claim that God is beyond gender. Thus, his position is clearly that, *despite* the fact that it is metaphysically misleading, God for some reason simply *prefers* to be characterized as masculine and not (equally) feminine.
28. We should also take seriously the possibility that bias against women influenced the pattern itself – and this even if we maintain a very high view of the authority and veracity of scripture. One who thinks that the Bible teaches nothing false might nevertheless think that erroneous views about cosmology, or about Christ's imminent return, or about the morality of slavery exerted some influence on the way in which certain truths were ultimately expressed in scripture; and one might also think that this influence contributed to making the Bible difficult to interpret in just those places. Thus, one might hold similar views about the influence of bias against women. Those who endorse a high Christology will insist that Jesus himself was free of such bias; but it does not follow that his own pattern of reference to God is uninfluenced by human biases. Perhaps, for example, it was aimed at accommodating (for reasons presumably unknown) long-entrenched beliefs about the God of Israel.
29. An earlier version of this article was discussed in the weekly reading group of the Center for Philosophy of Religion at the University of Notre Dame. I am grateful for the helpful suggestions that came out of that discussion, and would particularly like to thank Evan Fales, Kate Finley, Matt Getz, Jack Himmelwright, Amy Seymour, and James Sterba. I am grateful also to Alex Arnold, Michael Bergmann, C. L. Brinks, Jeff Brower, and two anonymous referees for this journal for their helpful comments on earlier drafts. Finally, special thanks are due to Pamela Sue Anderson, Sarah Coakley, Robin Dembroff, and Kathryn Pogin. I have benefited greatly from their extensive comments on earlier drafts, and from their advice both about the literature on feminism and gender and about various issues discussed in the article.

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