"Mother" and "Father" as Theolinguistic Antonyms

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Feminist religious-language reformers wish to eliminate or make substitutions for such masculine-loaded words as "lord," "king," "master," and "father." One substitute word, "mother," is of particular interest because it is sometimes used to replace "father," and sometimes it serves as a counterweight to "father." The appropriateness of these terms as encountered in Christian liturgical prayers, Scripture, the Creeds, and the Trinitarian formula "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" is often discussed nowadays. My first contention is that mother/father stand in linguistic opposition to each other, preventing interchangeable or parallel use. My second contention is that the Trinity represents an hypernymy blocking the use of feminine hyponyms.

The terms opposition, contrast, and antonymy are sometimes used without careful distinction, for they all illustrate at bottom a linguistic and philosophical fact: to establish the meaning of any word it is necessary to set up oppositional considerations. This hardly profound observation is matched by other, similar assertions by any number of structural semanticists. Trier even goes so far as to attach some psychological association of opposites in the mind of speaker or hearer upon each utterance (*Der deutsche Wortschatz im Sinnbezirk des Verstandes*, J. Trier, Heidelberg: Winter, 1931) even though perhaps most linguists would consider psychology to be more a part of a theory of language behaviour than structural analysis.

Everywhere we look in the universe we see opposites: forces of attraction and repulsion, left and right crystals, concave and convex, rest and movement—the list is very long. In his important little book, *Opposition*, C. K. Ogden reminds us that Aristotle, in his *Metaphysics*, discusses the oppositions of unity and multiplicity and being and not-being, and that other philosophers make reference to hot and cold, odd and even, good and evil, and so forth. The Pythagoreans had set the scene by listing some ten or twelve fundamental oppositions in the universe, among them, some of those mentioned above (*Opposition: A Linguistic and Psychological Analysis*, C. K. Ogden, Bloomington, London: Indiana Univ. Press, 1967, pp.21–23). One pair, masculine and feminine, is of particular interest for the purposes of this paper.

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Lyons states categorically that "binary opposition is one of the most important principles governing the structure of languages [and that] the most evident manifestation of this principle, as far as the vocabulary is concerned, is antonymy" (*Semantics, I* , John Lyons, Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1977, reprinted 1993, p.271). He makes clear that binary opposition takes various forms and that it is not always easy to decide which dichotomous relations lie within the scope of that technical term "antonymy." He begins by distinguishing between gradable and ungradable antonyms and cites typical examples, among them, respectively, "hot" and "cold" and "male" and "female"(ibid.). In the first instance, "hot" and "cold" are seen as lying on a scale or within a spectrum that shows a discernible change—cool or warm—on the way from one extreme to the other. The midpoint we can call "lukewarm" or "tepid." In the second instance, there is, as it were, an abrupt, non-graded substitution of one extreme for the other and no midpoint, i.e. unless one wanted to make a pseudo-biological argument demonstrating the production of hermaphrodites—for linguistic purposes, of no consequence. Yet both pairs, "hot" and "cold" and "male" and "female," are opposites, antonyms, albeit with a crucial logical difference. For "the predication of either one [of the ungradable opposites] implies the predication of the negation of the other, but also ... the predication of the negation of either implies the predication of the other" (ibid., 271–272). That is, when one identifies a person as female, the implication is that she is not male; when one contends that a person is not a female, the implication is that he is a male. These assumptions do not apply to gradable opposites. If we say something is hot, we mean it is not cold. If we say something is cold, we mean it is not hot. But if we say something is not hot, it does not necessarily mean it is cold. It would follow then that gradable antonyms are contraries while ungradable antonyms are contradictories. Therefore, "man" and "woman," "brother" and "sister" and "mother" and "father" all exhibit contradictory relationships. ("Husband" and "wife," though perhaps complementary in a restricted sense not unlike "male" and "female," are usually designated as examples of converseness.)

I argue elsewhere ("Calling God 'Father': A Theolinguistic Analysis," *Faith and Philosophy*, April 1995) that in "constructing a spectrum with 'father' and 'mother' at opposite ends, one would find 'parent' at the midpoint as the *shared* aspect of meaning [emphasis added]." This is not the same thing as the midpoint "lukewarm" in the pair "hot" and "cold," for the designation "lukewarm" does not inhere in either one of the pair. Thus, the antonymic pair "mother" and "father" can be identified hypernymically as "parent(s)," whereas the appropriate

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hypernym for "hot" and "cold" is "temperature." This will be an important distinction in our discussion of the Trinity.

Hypernymy (or hyperonymy) are terms understood as ordering certain relationships. A common illustration is that of the hypernym "colour" as superordinate to the seven coloured bands diffracted by the passage of white light through a prism, which is called the spectrum, as hyponyms. The application is broad, and we can say that hyponymy is a generic name not based on a recognizable species. A second example is the hypernym "mammal," such as dog, cat, horse, whale, human. In other words, hyponymy is an inclusion of one word in the domain of another word; thus, "dog" is a hyponym of "animal." Oftentimes, hyponyms are incompatible with one another, as black and white or young and old are antonymous. Important to remember is that not every set of hyponyms has a hypernym. Although we have stated that "mother" and "father" have the hypernym "parent," some family relationships in English, as also in some other languages, cannot be hypernymically ordered, as for example, "uncle" and "aunt." The presence or absence of any particular hypernym is generally a function of a particular culture. We can say, however, that the hypernym "parent(s)" is a linguistic universal.

Christianity is obliged to examine the Trinity not only linguistically but also as a truth of revelation, of Christian faith. If this be a "metaphysics of presence," so be it. The customary doctrinal statement of this fundamental tenet is that God exists in three persons, all being co-equal, co-eternal, indivisible, and of the same substance: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. These persons of the Trinity, then, comprise a unique lexical set. They are not conventionally hierarchically ordered and they do not exhibit part-whole relationships, but they are what we might call "ancestrally hypernymic." That is to say, by its very nature, the word "father" calls forth such descriptors as "progenitor" and "parent." The designation "son" implies a generational aspect. Although Christian theologians have never specifically stated, as far as we can determine, that God is of the male sex, the application of the words "father" and "son" and reference to the Holy Spirit as "he," as well as their grammatically masculine designation in gendered languages, has set the grammatical relationship in English as masculine as well as in Indo-European languages such as French (le dieu); Italian (il dio); and German (der Gott) in which grammatical gender is not generally biological.

In another study I have approached the matter of the lexical field of God by setting down the fundamental distinctive features describing the generally perceived entity behind the word "God." God is assumed to be

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the God of the Trinity defined above as containing divine and human nature in full hypostatic union. Expressed in conventional linguistic notation, God is: <+abstract>, <+non-material>, <+/-animate>, <-generational capability>, <-human>, <-male>, <-female>. That is to say: God is abstract, non-material (Question: In what sense is God substantial? Answer: "Only in God is his substance the same as his existence."), may or may not be animate, has no generational, familial, procreative capability, is neither human nor male nor female (*Plight*, p.40). This "ideal" God differs in one respect from the one presently imagined by many feminists, and others, who would argue that God is regarded in the Bible and by Christians as being <+male> and that we need to add the counterweighting element <+female>, even though such an analysis flies in the face of orthodox theology. Heim warns us that "[I]t would be consistent with the [Nicene] creed's faith to avoid any gender-linked word for God. According to [another] view, the word 'father'—while not implying that the first person of the Trinity is male (an implication that the Cappadocian fathers, for instance, vehemently deny)—conveys an aspect of trinitarian faith that no other way of speaking can express. [Furthermore,] it can be argued historically that the creed's 'father' language is not saying anything about God as known through creation (e.g., extrapolating knowledge of God from knowledge of human fathers), but rather is speaking of God within the Trinity: a subject unknowable and inexpressible save through revealed language" ("Gender and Creed: Confessing a Common Faith," *The Christian Century*, vol. 102,1985, 13:380.). Fact is, the pronoun 'it' as anaphoric for God would not convey the personal nature of one's relation with the Christian God. Neither would the self-conscious neologism 'he or she', which involves trinitarian definitional problems as well. By continuing to rely on 'father' and 'he' we reaffirm the nature of the Trinity and do no damage to the word God, for the latter is an inclusive term which will admit the hyponym "father," in keeping with theology and tradition, but not "mother"(ibid., p.41). Let us see why this is the only admissible linguistic approach.

First of all, as we said at the beginning of this paper, "father" and "mother" stand in an antonymic relationship to one other. They are mutually exclusive except when either is considered hypernymically as "parent." Neither may predicate the other, although similes with "mother" and adjectival formations such as "a motherly father" do sometimes occur. People have spoken of themselves as "the children of God."

Secondly, "mother" and "father," if substituted, result in semantic unequivalency.

Thirdly, "father" and "mother", if substituted, become oxymoronic.

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There are two types of oxymora: direct and indirect. The first, like "father" and "mother," is formed by combining two absolute antonyms, i.e., two terms whose only difference is the change from plus to minus of their lowest, distinctive lexical feature, for example, "a manly woman" or "a womanly man." The second is formed by juxtaposing two terms that are not direct antonyms, where one term is the hyponym of the other term's antonym, for example, "thunderous silence." If the antonym of "silence" is "noise" or "sound," then "thunderous" (<"thunder") is a hyponym of "sound," i.e., a particular kind of sound or noise (*Metaphor and Thought*, Second Edition, edited by Andrew Ortony, Cambridge and NY: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1993, p.269).

Fourthly, to repeat, "mother" and "father" are contradictories; they cannot be reconciled except under the rubric of "parent." However, this term, which is comparable to "sibling(s)," with its hyponyms "brother(s)" and "sister(s)," is unmarked both as to sex and to gender and thus does not transmit the grammatical gender, where present, or the tradition as contained in the Christian definition of the Trinity, particularly as the Father of the Son or the Son of the Father.

Fifthly, there is a certain linguistic skewness about the Trinity. We have seen that there are lexical oppositions of the antonymic, complementary, and converse sort, but there is also directional opposition. If the opposition is diametric, it is called antipodal; if it is perpendicular, it is called orthogonal. (Compare the points of the compass, where north and south are antipodal, as are east and west; but north and east, etc., are orthogonal.) The first oppositions we looked at can be imagined as existing along or at the extremes of a scale, whereas directional opposition implies movement to or from some point, as in "come": "go" or "arrive": "leave" or "up":"down" (Lyons, I, p.281). Each of the first two pairs of examples implies movement, respectively, toward and away from some point, whereas the pair "up":"down" only implies motion away from some point. The latter is of importance in genealogical considerations of descent.

If we correctly imagine the Trinity as consisting transcendently, and co-equally, of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, we must still account for the linguistic relationships among the three divine persons of the Trinity. Because of the terminology "father" and "son" we cannot escape the conclusion that an antipodal descent relationship is being described, especially since, in the Christian faith, Jesus was fully God and fully man—recall that there is a genealogy of Jesus—and Jesus himself told us to address God as "Father." The doctrinal description of the Holy Spirit as Paraclete, comforter, advocate, intercessor—but co-equal in every way with God the Father and God the Son—places him in

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an orthogonal position of sorts, in another linguistic dimension, as it were, in order to emanate from the Father through (and from) the Son and to operate both in heaven and on earth. If we were to boil together all the standard definitions of the Trinity, siphon off any residue of superfluity and inessentiality, we would probably arrive at a definition not too far from this: "The Father is the source of all things, the creator and maker, the unfathomable Reality. The Son is the expressive Person in God, the outgoing Reality who reveals and manifests the Father. The Holy Spirit is the responding Person in God. He proceeds from the Father through the Son. Through Him, the Son with all that He has manifested and revealed returns to the Father"(*The Faith of the Church*, James A. Pike and W. Norman Pittenger, Greenwich, CT: The Seabury Press, 1951, pp.119–120).

Paul van Buren has argued that the word "God" is not a proper name, neither is God an object, a referent in the conventional sense, nor even an idea, let alone a person. This does not mean that God does not exist or that he does not play a prominent role in the scriptural narrative where, admittedly, at first his name of Yahweh was not to be pronounced, but the name Adonai sounded instead. Later, in both the Old and the New Testaments, he acquires other names and appellations (*The Edge of Language:An Essay in the Logic of a Religion*, Paul M. van Buren, New York: Macmillan, 1972, pp.75, 137). Van Buren says, ""God", then, is not a separate, discrete concept or word for investigation, for any who wish to understand religious discourse. To examine the *word* [emphasis added] in isolation from its context in the life of religious people is to pursue an abstraction" (ibid, 70).

For the Christian, God is, discretely or collectively, the Trinity. The word itself is a hypernym, and its hyponyms are God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. That is to say, linguistically, "God" is an undifferentiated superordinate sememe, no more illustrative without reference to its subordinate items than, say, colour or mammal. But the hyponyms are unambiguous and limited to three. The doctrine of the Trinity and its linguistic composition make clear that the biblical narrative imposes on us masculine designation for all three persons of the Godhead and does not allow us to create additional members. We are, therefore, logically and linguistically prevented from changing God the Father to God the Mother or God the Father and Mother (or God the Mother and Father).

Most linguists maintain that ordered human thinking necessarily depends on language. I do not wish to argue that there are no non-verbal and worthwhile experiences of religion, such as are found by mystics, but I insist that the only tool we have for understanding religion or

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anything else is language. All real thinking involves the use of language whether natural or artificial (such as mathematics or computer languages). Van Buren makes a larger claim when he says that "it makes sense to attempt to understand a religion such as Christianity, in any of its various forms, as a linguistic enterprise, and that when we try to understand religion as linguistic behaviour, we are entering the subject by the front door, not crawling in a basement window" (ibid, p.67).

'Magic against Magic':an atheist priest's use of Christ in Iris Murdoch's *The Book and the Brotherhood*

Robert Hardy

In *Henry and Cato*[1] Iris Murdoch describes what it might be like for a priest to lose his belief in God - God understood 'in the traditional sense of that term; and the traditional sense is perhaps the only sense'.[2] In two later novels[3] Murdoch returns to the theme of a priest's loss of belief in God and, as was the case in Henry and Cato, she makes the priest's acknowledgement of that loss central to her portrayal of his integrity as a man; in one case she also hints at the almost unbearable grief the priest suffers as he drifts into the darkness of atheism.[4] In *The Book and the Brotherhood*,[5] however, Murdoch takes a different path: she describes how a priest, who lost his faith in God 'in the traditional sense' long before, nonetheless uses 'Christ' to help a young woman recover from despair.

The young woman, Tamar Hernshaw, takes the advice of another character (who suggests that 'Abortion is nothing, it's a method of birth control')[6] to have her pregnancy terminated. Resolving not to 'think about babies thrown away with the surgical refuse, dying like fishes snatched out of their water, dying like little fishes on a white slab',[7] Tamar enters the clinic 'as one in a dream'[8] and leaves it 'all raw anguished tormented consciousness'.[9] Murdoch does not spare the

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