

## To rehabilitate or replace? Reflections on the nature of conversations about male-gendered language for God

Naomi Browell

To cite this article: Naomi Browell (2022) To rehabilitate or replace? Reflections on the nature of conversations about male-gendered language for God, *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church*, 22:2, 159-169, DOI: [10.1080/1474225X.2022.2066281](https://doi.org/10.1080/1474225X.2022.2066281)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1474225X.2022.2066281>



© 2022 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 21 Apr 2022.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 183



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



# To rehabilitate or replace? Reflections on the nature of conversations about male-gendered language for God

Naomi Browell

Theology & Religious Studies, University of Glasgow, Glasgow, Scotland

## ABSTRACT

After attending the Responding to the Sacred: Gender and Liturgy in Conversation (R2S) conference, organised by a branch of the Scottish Episcopal Church, this author came away with questions regarding the nature of the conference conversations around the use of male-gendered language for God. This article, therefore, considers the direction of those conversations, which largely seemed to argue for rehabilitation of the language rather than replacement. Reflections on the conference are developed with specific attention to the nature of tradition as unfixed and an observation of the role age plays in conversations about language for God. The opportunity is also taken to consider the place of 'Father' and 'Lord' in the church's 'God-talk' alongside presentation of alternative, progressive, non-male terms for God. The concluding argument suggests that this conference fell short of encouraging much-needed movement away from male language for God.

## KEYWORDS

Liturgy; gender; theological language; feminism

If we're prepared to give some convincing defence of the words we are using then there is no reason why we shouldn't use some of the language – or God-talk – we've inherited from our tradition. In the light of this thought, how could we defend some of the male language we still use?<sup>1</sup>

The idea, and practice, of having a conference to discuss gender and liturgy was exciting and somewhat novel – despite the issue of gender and liturgical language being significant in feminist theology for decades.<sup>2</sup> The Responding to the Sacred: Gender and Liturgy in Conversation (R2S) conference was originally proposed by members of the Scottish Episcopal Church (SEC) Liturgy Committee. The Liturgy Committee are undergoing the process of producing new eucharistic liturgical materials, and a conference to discuss gender and liturgy was considered pertinent to that work. Despite enthusiasm from some corners of the SEC, R2S did not gain support at a Provincial level. Notwithstanding this disappointing response from the Province, the conference organisers moved forward, with the support of Bishop Ian Paton. R2S yielded an interesting and engaging list of insights, highlights of which

<sup>1</sup>R2S Steering Committee, 'Conference Report', 1.

<sup>2</sup>See, for example: Procter-Smith, Marjorie, *In Her Own Rite*; Duck, *Gender and the Name of God*; Christ, *She Who Changes*; and Wootton, *Practical Feminist Theology of Worship*.

This article has been corrected with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

© 2022 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

can be found in the Conference Report; however, the learning from decades of feminist liturgical scholarship did not feature heavily.<sup>3</sup> In my view, the conversations R2S facilitated did not build a platform for effecting real change to the use of exclusively male language for God in the liturgy.<sup>4</sup> God as 'Father': outdated, and yet defensible. This seemed to be the most prominent opinion from contributors to the conference when considering male-gendered language for God.

The conference did not exclusively present male-gendered language for God in a favourable light. The session entitled 'Contextualising the Conversation', a discussion between Merete Thomasson and Bridget Nichols, included consideration of language for God as metaphor and was critical of exclusively male-gendered imagery. There were other glimpses of this criticism, notably when Bill Paterson, in the 'Responding to the Masculine' session, argued that 'Father' can be a problematic image for men as much as for women. However, there were also arguments made in favour of maintaining 'Father'; the conversation between Beverley Clack and Harriet Harris considered how 'Father' might be reclaimed and freed from its negative connotations. In all of these conversations, 'Father' was the key male image considered. Not for the first time, 'Lord' remained an untouched male metaphor for God. In fact, 'Lord', features notably in the conference's concluding Service of the Word, whereas 'Father' was absented. Why is it that 'Father' receives so much attention and yet 'Lord' appears to carry on apparently unnoticed? The following reflections will be guided by this question as well as what might be considered the problematic words of the R2S Conference Report found at the top of the page.

Before embarking on my reflections from the R2S conference, it is worth briefly considering the context of the origins of the male metaphors for God which the Report suggests might need defending. There is no question that much of the language for God, or 'God-talk', still present in SEC liturgies, has been inherited from a time and place of androcentric thinking and ordering of society. The terms 'Father' and 'Lord' are no exception.<sup>5</sup> This is significant, not in order for traditional language to be regarded as 'lesser than', but rather as a reminder that the male-gendered language for God comes from a particular place and time. The language is historical and should be considered within the context from which it stems. As suggested, that context was a distinctly androcentric one. If the church is prepared to acknowledge the mistakes of the past, it must surely be one step closer to preventing the continuation of the same mistakes. In-depth examinations of the history of male-gendered language for God and the context in which they solidified their place in Christian liturgy are vital to this process. In particular, feminist liturgical scholar Gail Ramshaw has produced a significant body of work addressing the androcentric beginnings of much of the church's traditional language.<sup>6</sup> Ramshaw built an impressive theological career, including serving on

---

<sup>3</sup>For list of questions raised, see: R2S Steering Committee, 'Conference Report'.

<sup>4</sup>By exclusively male here, I mean that all of the gendered language for God in the liturgy is male. There is, of course, use of non-gendered language, but also a complete lack of female language to balance the male. I would like to note also my use of 'male'/'female' as opposed to 'masculine'/'feminine'. The latter descriptors are more difficult to disentangle from societal expectations of men and women, so I intentionally avoid using them.

<sup>5</sup>For more on this see, for example: Johnson, *She Who Is*, with particular reference to chapter 2, 'Feminist Theology and Critical Discourse about God'.

<sup>6</sup>Gail Ramshaw has produced significant work on this topic, including: Ramshaw, *Liturgical Language*; Ramshaw, *God beyond Gender*; Ramshaw, *Reviving Sacred Speech*.

the committee that developed the Revised Common Lectionary. Despite this, it is likely that much of Ramshaw's feminist writing remains unseen by the average church-goer. Some of Ramshaw's work will be presented below.

Rather than simply repeating the historical examinations provided by scholars such as Ramshaw, this paper will also address two topics which arose for me after the R2S plenary. I will first consider the nature of tradition, particularly the idea of tradition as unfixed. After becoming more aware of the part age may play in conversations about the language of God, I will also present some observations on this theme. Before concluding this paper, I will introduce some examples of alternative language for God for consideration.

Another prominent feminist liturgical theologian, Nicola Slee, provides the basis for exploration of the concept of tradition. Despite also making significant contributions to feminist theology, Slee's name is another that is likely to be unfamiliar to many in the church. Due to this potential anonymity, I provide Slee's own description of 'the nature of all theology' as a brief introduction to her perspective:

... invitational, conversational and contextual ... [theology] is created anew out of the confluence of time and space, place and social-political moment, calling new truths out of the givenness of scripture and tradition.<sup>7</sup>

Slee sees theology as not only worked out in a whole variety of contexts – beyond the walls of the academy – but also as 'created anew' as societies change. Despite this, Slee remains committed to the central importance of scripture and tradition. This commitment is maintained on the basis of an understanding of tradition as 'fluid, complex and developing ... whose identity is constantly open to question and revision'.<sup>8</sup> Slee explains:

To speak of the givenness of scripture and tradition should not suggest that scripture and tradition themselves are stable, unchanging categories. As new discoveries of the past are constantly made ... so the 'givenness' of the past is constantly unsettled and reformed by the creative breath of the Spirit and the emergence of new human knowledge and wisdom.<sup>9</sup>

Although scripture and tradition remain at the core of theology, according to Slee, they are imagined as having a dynamic nature, constantly open to the movement of the Spirit. A similar understanding can be found in the work of Juliette Day. In her examination of liturgical texts, Day makes reference to the work of Paul Bradshaw, who 'emphasized ... that the content [of liturgical texts] does not remain fixed for all time'.<sup>10</sup> Significantly, Day explains that this 'process may affect contemporary texts just as much as ... historic liturgical texts'.<sup>11</sup> Tradition should not be considered static, holding on to historic texts or metaphors, but equally the texts and imagery produced today must be open to the changing wind of the Spirit.

The idea that tradition and liturgy are unfixed is not merely theoretical. The Code of Canons produced by the SEC currently includes at least five authorised versions of Sunday eucharistic liturgy.<sup>12</sup> This variety reflects Bradshaw's understanding of liturgy as 'living literature':

<sup>7</sup>Slee, *Fragments for Fractured Times*, 3.

<sup>8</sup>Slee, 'Re-Member', 33.

<sup>9</sup>Slee, *Fragments for Fractured Times*, 3.

<sup>10</sup>Day, *Reading the Liturgy*, 6.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid.

<sup>12</sup>See Canon 22: General Synod of SEC, 'Code of Canons 2020', 71–72.

... identified by “the fact that it circulated within a community, forming a part of its heritage and tradition, but [undergoing] periodic revision and rewriting in response to changing historical and cultural circumstances”.<sup>13</sup>

Without going into an in-depth examination of the various liturgies authorised by the SEC it is possible to develop a sense of how the liturgy has been altered as societal circumstances have changed. The titles of the liturgies alone, such as *Scottish Book of Common Prayer 1929*, *Scottish Liturgy 1970*, *Scottish Liturgy 1982*, reveal the significance of passing time. The SEC eucharistic liturgy is, in some sense, under continual review and renewal. Of note for this article is the round of permitted changes to *Scottish Liturgy 1982*, introduced in 2017. In the document a number of prayers – including the *Confession and Absolution* and the *Nicene Creed* – are altered to allow for the use of ‘God’ in place of ‘he’ in reference to the Divine.<sup>14</sup> The most recent round of formal revision to *Scottish Liturgy 1982* in fact integrates these alterations into a version which has gone through its first of two rounds of authorisation at General Synod. Soon, reference to God as ‘he’ will no longer be present in contemporary SEC liturgy. It is possible to retain a sense of a tradition without enacting exactly all the details of the tradition’s past.

Slee, Bradshaw, and Day acknowledge the fluid nature of tradition where change is seen as a sign of life, and the SEC liturgy appears to represent this in practice in some ways. It seems likely that a majority, if not all, of the speakers from the R2S conference would agree, at least to some extent, with this interpretation of tradition as fluid. Indeed, the plenary conversation included a discussion of how the liturgy might be, or in fact might *need* to be, adapted to provide a more inclusive experience for worshippers. However, elements of the conference report as well as the dialogue around the use of ‘Father’ do not appear to reflect this desire for change. The male-gendered nature of God-talk in the church seems almost to be regarded as indispensable, needing to be rehabilitated rather than trimmed down. The discussion between Nichols and Thomasson, from which the quotation at the top of this piece stems, represents this restorative approach towards male-gendered God-talk which seemed most prominent at R2S. The conference report indicates a similar attitude arising in the other sessions. The discussion between Harriet Harris and Beverley Clack also appears to focus on rehabilitating male language. The report shows that Harris and Clack agreed that ‘male or patriarchal language that was being used abusively’ was unfavourable and that a multitude of ‘names’ for God was important.<sup>15</sup> Harris and Clack’s conversation included an acknowledgement of how the use of ‘Father’ in God-talk contributes to upholding patriarchal structures. However, their dialogue around the term seemed, in my view, to be focused on how to change attitudes to the male term, rather than address the potential negative outcomes of its continued dominance in God-talk.<sup>16</sup> Although not reflected in the conference report, the discussion between Bill Paterson and Léon van Ommen also considered the issue of calling God ‘Father’. Similarly to Harris and Clack, van Ommen argued in favour of finding more positive ways to relate to God as ‘Father’.<sup>17</sup> In contrast, Paterson did not speak encouragingly around the use of ‘Father’ for God.

<sup>13</sup>Day, *Reading the Liturgy*, 6.

<sup>14</sup>SEC Liturgy Committee, ‘Permitted Changes’, 5–6.

<sup>15</sup>See note 1.

<sup>16</sup>Gender & Liturgy Conference 2021, *Panel 2*, from 5:38.

<sup>17</sup>Gender & Liturgy Conference 2021, *Panel 3*, from 48:51.

Rather, Paterson's contribution to the discussion focused on the unhealthy relationships many men have with their fathers which may tarnish the term's use in God-talk for men as well as women.<sup>18</sup> Despite the male-gender of the term 'Lord', none of the panel conversations addressed its use. In the SEC liturgy, 'Lord' appears more frequently than 'Father', but even in a conference organised to address gender and liturgy it seems to have passed under the radar. Indeed, in the concluding act of worship organised by the conference committee, 'Lord' is used five times, while 'Father' is excluded.<sup>19</sup>

As shown above, the liturgy is a piece of 'living literature', changing over time. Despite the evidence of a dynamic liturgical tradition, the maleness of God-talk has proved relatively inflexible since the liturgy was translated into English. However, this may not always have been the case. Teresa Berger argues that there was a presence of what she calls 'feminine imagery' in some earlier liturgies. According to Berger, '[i]n the early Syrian and Armenian baptismal traditions, the Holy Spirit is imaged as mother.'<sup>20</sup> This being the case, God-talk cannot be understood to have always been exclusively male. Moreover, looking specifically at the use of 'Father', it can be shown that this term for God has not remained consistent through the ages of the church. J. Frank Henderson conducted a review of three ancient liturgies, dating from the 6<sup>th</sup> to the 8<sup>th</sup> centuries. In his findings, Henderson discovered that the use of '*Pater*' ('Father') was 'vastly outnumber[ed]' by other terms.<sup>21</sup> '*Dominus*' ('Lord'), on the other hand, is shown to occur most frequently.<sup>22</sup> Does this prevalence of 'Lord' from a relatively early period in church history protect it from dispute? As will be shown below, Gail Ramshaw argues otherwise. There seems to be a disparity between how often a male term is used for God and how frequently it was addressed in discussion at R2S.

A number of questions arise for me from this examination of tradition and a reflection on the discussion of 'Father' at the conference. If tradition is not static, is it the best sign of life and use of energy to seek new meanings for historical terms to justify their continued use? If the tradition of liturgy is a 'living literature' why must the church attempt to make old terms appear appropriate for the contemporary context? Might it not be more fruitful to look for new metaphors that speak into the twenty-first century with greater ease? This is not to say that any contemporary God-talk should usurp older terms as an inflexible, most perfect example of how to speak to or about God. No language for God can be considered a perfect, or permanent, representation. There was some encouraging discussion of the need for more expansive language for God at the conference, but, in my view, the continued attempts to resurrect 'Father' seemed to draw attention away from new possibilities. As well as this, the limited regard for the gendered nature of the term 'Lord' and its reiterated use in the concluding act of worship suggests there is more work to do.

I have spoken, conversationally, with a number of women over 50 who are familiar with feminist theology (at least to a certain extent) about the use of male-gendered terms for God. As I had more of these conversations, I began to notice something of a pattern. Although the male language previously bothered them, these women spoke about how

---

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., from 44:36.

<sup>19</sup>'Gender and Liturgy: Service of the Word'.

<sup>20</sup>Berger, *Women's Ways of Worship*, 38.

<sup>21</sup>Henderson, 'Ways God Is Addressed', 31.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid.

their feelings have changed over time. They either gave themselves time to become used to the language, became desensitised to it, or found new ways to engage with it that worked for them on an individual, personal level. Of course, this is not to suggest that all women in the church over 50 have this experience or are happy with the male language. Indeed, as will be presented below, some women may not even have felt able to engage deeply with the maleness of so much God-talk. In any case, the way my conversations have developed appears to have been reflected in the nature of the discussion around male God-talk at R2S and therefore seems worth considering.

The conversation between Harris and Clack mentioned above, 'Made in God's Image', echoed this apparent tendency for individual women to find new ways to engage with the male language. Clack describes 'on her changing relationship to the gendered language of God. At one point the maleness of much God-talk, at least in part, drove Clack out of the church. However, upon her return to the church – after a period of around fifteen years away – the gendered language seemed to no longer be such an issue for her. Clack wonders if the apparent lack of hierarchy in her Methodist congregation had an impact on how she relates to the male language. I do not wish to dismiss this perspective, but simply to highlight that when she was young, Clack found the language offensive, but as she matured, it no longer had the same impact. Harris agreed with this changing attitude to the male language.<sup>23</sup> At the conference plenary, a majority of the contributors were women over 50. How much, and in what way, might this have impacted the nature of the conversation around male-gendered language for God at the conference? Does extended engagement with the male language dull outrage at its use? Or, indeed, do other young women have the same experience as Clack, feeling themselves driven out of the church by male God-talk and perhaps not returning as Clack did? Instead of seeking first and foremost for alternate, contemporary metaphors for God which might speak more directly to a wider audience, there was generally more discussion in the presentations of how the church might 'defend' or reclaim historical images developed in androcentric periods. I acknowledge that each person will have their own relationship with the language used for God. I simply wish to make this observation. Although feminist Christians through the decades have dissected the male language and made suggestions for alternatives, this did not come across as a key element of a conference organised to discuss gender and liturgy. Why might that have been the case?

As a counter to the conference, I wish to take this opportunity to present some of those alternatives which have been developed by feminist Christians. In order to do so, it seems pertinent to offer a brief description of some of the church's understanding of 'Father' and 'Lord'.<sup>24</sup> As discussed above, Gail Ramshaw has been a key contributor to the field of feminist liturgical theology. This has included cultivating a number of progressive possibilities for God-talk. As a faithful Christian with a commitment to tradition, Ramshaw makes use of in-depth liturgical and historical examinations to work towards her new suggested metaphors. She uses this method to develop more inclusive alternatives for both 'Father' and 'Lord' that will still reflect what lies at the heart of the church's use of the terms. Ramshaw gives careful consideration to the development of 'Father' as used in God-talk, focusing on the nature of the term as apparently, for some,

---

<sup>23</sup>Gender & Liturgy Conference 2021, *Panel 2*, from 3:50.

<sup>24</sup>More in-depth examinations can be found elsewhere and will be pointed to in the footnotes.

integral to an understanding of the Trinity. It is possible to find examinations of ‘Father’ from a feminist theological perspective in a great many scholarly works, but I will work, for the most part, with Ramshaw’s *God Beyond Gender* here.<sup>25</sup> Some have argued that ‘Father, Son, Spirit’ offers a ‘name’ for God.<sup>26</sup> As Ramshaw describes, however, ‘Father’ as a reference to a god did not originate with Christianity which makes it difficult to maintain the argument that ‘Father’ is God’s ‘name’. It is unclear, as well, whether Jesus’ apparent use of ‘Father’ in his famous prayer was really a defining moment at the time, or whether it was a merely seized on by theologians down the ages to further their theological arguments.<sup>27</sup> On top of this, there is an obvious pitfall in the continued use of ‘Father’ at the expense of other metaphors, the anthropomorphising of God into an old man. This has served to elevate androcentric and sexist thinking, as described best by Elizabeth Johnson:

exclusive, literal patriarchal speech about God is both oppressive and idolatrous. Functions to justify social structures of dominance/subordination and an androcentric world view inimical to the genuine and equal human dignity of women, while it simultaneously restricts the mystery of God.<sup>28</sup>

In accordance with this perspective, Ramshaw determines that ‘the church must continually search for better, truer, clearer, more faithful language about the God it knows as triune.’<sup>29</sup> As a contribution to this search, Ramshaw offers images such as ‘protector’, ‘guide’, ‘mother’, and ‘living water’, among a variety of others.<sup>30</sup>

Although the R2S contributors spoke favourably of ways to use ‘Father’ in God-talk, it was not included in the final act of worship at the conference. On the other hand, ‘Lord’ appears to have gone completely unnoticed and was included in the service, apparently without consideration.

Just as with ‘Father’, Ramshaw worked through the use of ‘Lord’ to develop alternatives, and details her analysis in *God Beyond Gender*. It would seem that ‘Lord’ plays a particular role in the church’s language about God. Through a complex web of translation, the bible has come to use ‘LORD’ to represent what some consider to be the ‘name’ of God, YHWH. The use of small caps indicates an instance of the shorthand, also called the Tetragrammaton, which represents the answer God gave to Moses at the burning bush, roughly translated as ‘I am who I am’ (Exodus 3:14). ‘Lord’ has also been used to translate the term of respect offered to Jesus, ‘Adonai’. This puts ‘Lord’ in a unique position to simultaneously call on God’s ‘name’ and point to Jesus.<sup>31</sup> The specific role played by ‘Lord’ may make it appear untouchable. I wonder, however, how widely the particularities of the translation are known, how familiar church-goers are with the use of ‘Lord’ in this special way. Certainly it was not known to myself, despite completing my undergraduate degree Theological Studies, until I began to look more closely. Although the term may seem to play a distinctive role, this dual interpretation of

<sup>25</sup>See, for example: D’Angelo, ‘Abba and “Father”’; LaCugna, *God for Us*; Daly, ‘After the Death of God the Father’; and Kim, ‘Korean American Women and the Church’.

<sup>26</sup>Ramshaw, *God beyond Gender*, 75–76.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., 78–81.

<sup>28</sup>Johnson, *She Who Is*, 40.

<sup>29</sup>Ramshaw, *God beyond Gender*, 92; This analysis can be found in Chapter 7 ‘The Language of Trinitarian Doctrine’: Ibid., 75–92.

<sup>30</sup>Ramshaw, *God beyond Gender*, 99, 105, 115.

<sup>31</sup>Ramshaw, *God beyond Gender*, 47–52.



'Lord' may have little impact on how worshippers meet the term when they experience it in the liturgy. Further to this, it is still a metaphor and cannot be claimed to capture the essence of God in a perfect way inaccessible by any other faithfully considered metaphor. In place of the male option of 'Lord', Ramshaw makes three suggestions, all of which are non-gendered: '*the Living One*', '*the Name*', and 'I AM'.<sup>32</sup> Each of these alternatives speaks into the origins of 'Lord' as YHWH/Adonai as briefly outlined. Ramshaw offers these metaphors hoping 'that use of the[se] titles . . . will diminish the preponderance of LORD/Lord, and that the interplay of these terms can enrich expression of the Christian conviction that in Jesus is the mystery of God.'<sup>33</sup> Ramshaw is certainly not alone in proposing more expansive possibilities for God-talk. Johnson's 'SHE WHO IS', discussed extensively in her book of the same title, follows a similar theological thread to Ramshaw's 'I AM', proposed as an alternative to 'Lord'.<sup>34</sup> Johnson takes an extra step along the path to prefer a female alternative to the ungendered option from Ramshaw. These are just two examples from a whole range of feminist theological scholars who have written on the subject of male-gendered language for God and made arguments for alternatives.<sup>35</sup>

While some have made their contributions working from a more academic perspective, other feminist thinkers have taken the creative liturgical route to suggest expansive, non-male God-talk. Janet Morley and John McQuiston II are just two examples from within the Anglican Communion. They have written formal prayers using alternative language for God. Within those prayers, each writer has found a great number of ways to speak of God beyond 'Father' and 'Lord'. Morley offers 'Merciful creator' and John McQuiston II, 'Uncreated, Ultimate, Unfathomable'.<sup>36</sup> Nicola Slee, although working largely within academia, has made a significant contribution to the body feminist creative prayer. In her *Praying Like a Woman*, Slee approaches God in prayer in all manner of ways, though for the most part steering clear of introducing new, equivalent terms for 'Father' and 'Lord'.<sup>37</sup> Instead Slee prays to God with phrases such as 'Absent yet present God' and 'Christ whose piercing gaze sees all that I have been'.<sup>38</sup> Despite opting to move away from a more direct replacement of the male terms, Slee shows how turning to God in prayer might be done differently while remaining committed to her tradition.

While all of these more expansive options for God-talk offer the potential to give much-needed breath of life to the language for God used by the church, they must, of course, be held accountable to the same degree as all images for God. Ramshaw offers this warning when speaking of one much lauded alternative, 'Mother': '[a]s with all metaphors, the use of God-as-mother brings both possibilities and pitfalls.'<sup>39</sup> Although she, and many others, have worked diligently to propose what they see as more appropriate images for use in today's God-talk, Ramshaw holds all language about

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., 54–58; For Ramshaw's full discussion of the historical development of the use of 'Lord' in the church, see Chapter 5 'The Enigmatic Name of God': Ibid., 47–58.

<sup>33</sup>Ramshaw, *God beyond Gender*, 58.

<sup>34</sup>Johnson, *She Who Is*, 242.

<sup>35</sup>See, for example: Soskice, *The Kindness of God*; Duck, *Gender and the Name of God*; DeConick, *Holy Misogyny*; Procter-Smith, Marjorie, *In Her Own Rite*; Walton, *Feminist Liturgy*; and McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*.

<sup>36</sup>Morley, *All Desires Known*, 33; McQuiston II, *A Prayer Book for the 21st Century*, 21.

<sup>37</sup>Slee, *Like a Woman*.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., 17.

<sup>39</sup>Ramshaw, *God beyond Gender*, 106.

God in the same careful manner. It is possible to speak of God differently, moving away from the exclusive approach of male-gendered language. However, the church must always be aware that no language about God should be considered a perfect representation, or as untouchable.

I would like to introduce one final thought on the importance of embracing new, non-male metaphors for God. Although worshippers today experience God-talk in a culture drastically different from the androcentric one in which the male-gendered language developed, we are still living with the legacy of the patriarchy. Both within and beyond the church, the issue of male violence against women – both physical and otherwise, as in coercive control – is still a daily reality. Estimates from the World Health Organisation (WHO) published in March 2021 suggest that one in three women ‘have been subjected to either physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence or non-partner sexual violence in their lifetime.’<sup>40</sup> The truth of these experiences is certainly a part of my own argument in favour of moving away from male-gendered language for God. However, living in such situations may prevent some women from being able to develop feelings of outrage at the maleness of God-talk. If a woman finds herself trapped and controlled, her ability to challenge patriarchal systems is severely limited. This is yet another reason why there is still much work to do. Historical androcentric societies laid the groundwork for the world we live in today. The twenty-first century finds many still clinging to patriarchal norms and preventing some women from finding their voice. Questions must be asked. The harms of androcentric thinking are immense and varied – including such issues as male violence against women, the gender pay gap, and a growing online presence of misogynistic thinking.<sup>41</sup> Is it appropriate to maintain a term such as ‘Lord’ as a central metaphor for God in contemporary SEC liturgy when these harms continue and are widely known? As large portions of society work towards greater equality, should the church be seeking primarily to reclaim language such as ‘Father’? Rather, should the church not be joining in that work and generally replacing such language (as the concluding worship of the conference did with ‘Father’)? More progressive ways of God-talk have been around for several decades, however there has been resistance to integrating them into the SEC’s worship. Due to their continued prevalence in the liturgy, this resistance is arguably particularly strong should the changes come at the expense of ‘Father’ or ‘Lord’. The R2S concluding act of worship indicates the latter, ‘Lord’, seems particularly unshakeable.

The traditional male-gendered terms do not convey to worshippers today what they would have meant to Christians in previous centuries. For example, in the time of the early Christians, biological thinking believed it was the male alone who played an active role in the creation of children. This belief extended all the way into the seventeenth century.<sup>42</sup> In such a context it is unsurprising that a God who is understood to have created all that exists would be described as ‘Father’. However, just as our scientific thinking has progressed, should not our metaphors also move to reflect the changing understanding of the world around us? Moreover, my argument has been that tradition is not static. It is possible to hold on to something of a tradition without clinging to terms from a different time. New words might more appropriately share the sense of God’s love

---

<sup>40</sup>‘Violence against Women’.

<sup>41</sup>Office for National Statistics, ‘Gender Pay Gap in the UK’; University of Exeter, ‘Major New Study to Track Spread of Incel Ideology Online Will Help Inform Counter-Extremism Efforts’.

<sup>42</sup>Methuen, ‘Mary in Context’, 15–23.

for the world today. In 1995, Gail Ramshaw wrote that ‘the feminist reform of liturgical language . . . will be a hundred-year project, but only if the church is zealously engaged in the endless and exacting tasks of reform.’<sup>43</sup> The R2S conference highlighted the metaphorical character of language about God and, to some extent, discussed the problematic nature of the term ‘Father’ in reference to God. However, it seemed to me to stop short of zealous contribution to the project of ‘feminist reform of liturgical language’.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributor

*Naomi Browell* is a post-graduate research student at the University of Glasgow. She works in the areas of feminist and liturgical theology and is currently studying for a PhD with the benefit of the Dowanhill Scholarship.

## References

- Berger, T. *Women’s Ways of Worship: Gender Analysis and Liturgical History*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999.
- Christ, C.P. *She Who Changes: Re-Imagining the Divine in the World*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Mcmillan, 2003.
- D’Angelo, M.R. ‘Abba and “Father”’: Imperial Theology and the Jesus Tradition’. *Journal of Biblical Literature* 111, no. 4 (Winter 1992): 611–30. doi:10.2307/3267435.
- Daly, M. ‘After the Death of God the Father: Women’s Liberation and the Transformation of Christian Consciousness’. In *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion*, ed. C.P. Christ and J. Plaskow, 53–62. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979.
- Day, J. *Reading the Liturgy: An Exploration of Texts in Christian Worship*. London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2014.
- DeConick, A.D. *Holy Misogyny: Why the Sex and Gender Conflicts in the Early Church Still Matter*. London: Continuum, 2011.
- Duck, R.C. *Gender and the Name of God: The Trinitarian Baptismal Formula*. New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1991.
- ‘Gender & Liturgy Conference 2021.’ ‘Responding to the Sacred: Gender and Liturgy in Conversation’, 2021. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=431\\_NiAZP3s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=431_NiAZP3s).
- ‘Gender & Liturgy Conference 2021.’ ‘Responding to the Sacred: Gender and Liturgy in Conversation’, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SrA1R9hMIko>.
- General Synod of SEC. ‘Code of Canons 2020’. Edinburgh: Scottish Episcopal Church, 2020. <https://www.scotland.anglican.org/wp-content/uploads/Code-of-Canons-2020.pdf>.
- Henderson, J.F. ‘Ways in Which God Is Addressed in Ancient Latin Liturgical Prayers’, 2002. [http://jfrankhenderson.ca/pdf/Ways\\_in\\_which\\_God\\_is\\_addressed.pdf](http://jfrankhenderson.ca/pdf/Ways_in_which_God_is_addressed.pdf).
- Johnson, E.A. *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*. New York, NY: Crossroad, 1992.
- Kim, G.J.-S. ‘Korean American Women and the Church: Identity, Spirituality, and Gender Roles’. *Feminist Theology* 29, no. 1 (September 2020): 18–32. doi:10.1177/0966735020944893.
- LaCugna, C.M. *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991.

---

<sup>43</sup>Ramshaw, *God beyond Gender*, 135.

- McFague, S. *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language*, 2nd ed. Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1982.
- McQuiston, J., II. *A Prayer Book for the 21st Century*. Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 2004.
- Methuen, C. 'Mary in Context: A Historical Methodological Reflection'. *Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ (ARCIC II)*, GS Misc 872 (2008): 15–23.
- Morley, J. *All Desires Known*, Expanded ed. London: SPCK, 1992.
- Office for National Statistics. 'Gender Pay Gap in the UK', October 2021. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/earningsandworkinghours/bulletins/genderpaygapintheuk/2021>.
- Procter-Smith, M. *In Her Own Rite: Constructing Feminist Liturgical Tradition*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1990.
- R2S Steering Committee. 'Conference Report', 2021.
- Ramshaw, G. *God Beyond Gender: Feminist Christian God-Language*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1995.
- Ramshaw, G. 'Liturgical Language: Keeping It Metaphoric, Making It Inclusive'. In *American Essays in Liturgy*. Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1996.
- Ramshaw, G. *Reviving Sacred Speech: The Meaning of Liturgical Language: Second Thoughts on Christ in Sacred Speech*. Akron, OH: OSL, 2000.
- 'Responding to the Sacred: Gender and Liturgy in Conversation: A Service of the Word'. St Mary's Cathedral, 2021. <https://www.docdroid.net/gnxUo0z/genlitworship-v3-pdf>.
- SEC Liturgy Committee. 'Permitted Changes to 1982 Liturgy: Rationale', 2017. <https://www.scotland.anglican.org/wp-content/uploads/Permitted-changes-to-1982-Liturgy-rationale.pdf>.
- Slee, N. 'The Power to Re-Member'. In *Swallowing a Fishbone?: Feminist Theologians Debate Christianity*, ed. D. Hampson, 33–49. London: SPCK, 1996.
- Slee, N. *Praying like a Woman*. London: SPCK, 2004.
- Slee, N. *Fragments for Fractured Times: What Feminist Practical Theology Brings to the Table*. London: SCM Press, 2020.
- Soskice, J.M. *The Kindness of God: Metaphor, Gender, and Religious Language*. Oxford: OUP, 2008.
- University of Exeter. 'Major New Study to Track Spread of Incel Ideology Online Will Help Inform Counter-Extremism Efforts', January 2022. [https://www.exeter.ac.uk/news/homepage/title\\_891095\\_en.html](https://www.exeter.ac.uk/news/homepage/title_891095_en.html).
- 'Violence against Women'. (accessed May 20, 2021). <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/violence-against-women>.
- Walton, J.R. *Feminist Liturgy: A Matter of Justice*. American Essays in Liturgy. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000.
- Wootton, J.H. *Introducing a Practical Feminist Theology of Worship*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000.