

FACING GOD: AN EXAMINATION OF HOW PEOPLE TALK ABOUT GOD
IN AN INCLUSIVE ENVIRONMENT

A thesis submitted to the Theological School of
Drew University in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree,
Master of Arts

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May 2014

ABSTRACT

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M.A. Thesis by

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May 2014

Throughout Christianity's history, with few exceptions, male language has been used to describe God. There have been many movements to change this language, as it limits people's understandings of God and is also harmful to the way women see themselves. Some religious institutions, like Theological Seminary, have implemented an inclusive language policy in order to initiate change in how people talk about God. I have analyzed how God is presented in worship services from August-December 2013 by doing participant observation and a coding analysis of the spoken and written liturgy. Using the work of Ana-Maria Rizzuto and her ideas about God Images and God Concepts, I also conducted fifteen interviews with individuals within the school's "congregation" in order to understand how they talk about God personally. I found that, overwhelmingly, while people thought they were being inclusive by using gender neutral names and titles for God; feminine names and titles were not used, both in the services and in individuals. Using the work of past feminist theologians, like Elizabeth Johnson and Rosemary Radford Ruether, I discuss the lack of feminine language, and the hesitancy in trying to change the masculine theological language outside of the seminary.

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CHAPTER ONE

When I first sat down to begin my coding of the worship services at Theological Seminary,¹ I was nervous and cautious. I had arrived just slightly too early, which meant I was the first congregant there. I chose my spot, an area I would sit in for the rest of the semester, which had a pillar blocking the video camera from seeing me. I already knew some of the students who were fluttering around trying to prepare the area and finish decorating the altar, but they were too busy to talk to me.² I arranged my bags in the seat next to me so I could sit by myself and code, with no one looking over my shoulder to ask what I was doing.

When I last sat down in the worship space to code the final service of the semester before the Advent service, it was partially bittersweet and partially relieving. I had become a somewhat constant member, sitting beside the pillar, and I had met many people just by sitting there. People recognized me. They said hello and asked about my day. Leaving the service that day was uplifting because a part of my research was done. It was also sad, because I had gotten used to the camaraderie of the people, and I would miss it.

Going into this research, the question I had was about inclusive theological language, specifically focusing on gender issues. How does an institution committed to

¹ “Theological Seminary” is a pseudonym that will be used in order to protect the identity of the institution and the individuals within the school.

² I was grateful for this, as I was not sure how to explain my presence to them. I was not supposed to interfere with their worship in any way, and telling people I was studying and coding the services could do that.

using inclusive theological language talk about God? How do the people within that institution talk about God? How is inclusive language in reference to God being used, or is it being used at all, by either the community or the individuals? How is God commonly named in this community?

As my research continued and I began doing interviews, my questions became more nuanced. Why does feminine God language stand out in people's memories more than masculine language for God? How do people frame the inclusive language policy of Theological Seminary depending on whether or not they agree with it? Do they use that language in their daily lives, or in their own churches, or not? Do they see the policy as important?

But the first question is: why is inclusive theological language important? What does it mean to use gender inclusive or gender neutral theological language? What is the traditional theological language in American, English-speaking Christianity, and who has been talking about it?

PAST DISCUSSIONS ON GENDERED GOD LANGUAGE

The English language has passed down a grammar that privileges males over females, and ultimately erases females and their experiences. This is shown in multiple ways. First, the pronoun "he" and the word "man" are (grammatically) seen as comprehensive and including all people, regardless of whether or not they are men, due to male grammarians in the 1700s and 1800s (Spender, 1980, 148-151). Second, when pairs of opposites exist (like lion or lioness), one is seen as neutral (semantically unmarked) while the other is not neutral (semantically marked). Usually, it is the masculine form that is unmarked, while the feminine form is marked. This supports an

idea that the male form of anything is the neutral, the default, and the norm (Graddol and Swann, 1989, 99-101). Because of this, there are lexical gaps in the English language that make it difficult to describe women's experiences, since men's experiences are the norm (Graddol and Swann, 1989, 110).³

Feminists have extensively critiqued these grammar rules as sexist and outdated. In her article "Inclusive Language and Power," Letty Russell (1985b) discusses the power of language and how easily it can be used for harm, since those with power in society often set the norms for language and also have control over the education system and other forms of communication (585). Sallie McFague (1985a) is even more straightforward, saying "whoever names the world owns the world" (8). Language is a huge and problematic social construct for feminists, and is constantly called into question—especially when discussing religion.

Throughout Christianity's history, with few exceptions, male language has been used to describe God. In the Bible, God is primarily revealed as male. One reason for naming God with male titles is based in historical understandings of Hebrew culture. Claude Geffré (1981) links the tradition of seeing God as "Father" back throughout the Hebrew Scriptures⁴ in writers like Hosea, Jeremiah, and third Isaiah (44). D. T. Williams (1990) discusses the masculine language in the Hebrew Scriptures⁵ and explains that God was revealed as male (to Israel) in order to be distinguished from other gods of the times (260). This same idea is echoed by Elizabeth Achtemeier (1993, 20). So, the God of

³ They elaborate that this can be seen in how sexual intercourse is described either in neutral terms (to have sex, to orgasm), or in terms that necessitates someone who has a penis—a cisgender man, in their view (to penetrate, to ejaculate). Also the double standards around promiscuity between men and women play into these lexical gaps by the names given to people who have a lot of sex.

⁴ "Hebrew Scriptures" is my own language, and not Geffré's words. He calls the Jewish Scriptures the "Old Testament" throughout his writing, and also consistently refers to God as "he." I will be doing neither of these things in this paper.

⁵ See above note.

Israel was emphasized as male in order to distinguish that god from other gods of the time, which tended to be a mix of both male and female deities.

However, this does not mean that God is male solely because of an ancient culture, as that is not a valid enough reason to keep God's maleness in today's culture. This leads us into the second reason for seeing God as inherently male: revelation from scripture. In the Christian Bible, Jesus comes and refers to God as "Father" (Williams, 1990, 262). The idea is that Jesus "has such a concern with women" and was "so out of keeping with his culture," but still only referred to God in male terms, which means it is something important that everyone should do (262). Geffré states that this (Jesus calling God "Father") is theologically important because it allows for other people to invoke God as Father and, thus, become children of God.⁶ Achtemeier (1993) says that God would not be revealed in a way that was contrary to God's nature (20). Thus, because God is revealed in the Bible as male (through names, titles, and pronouns), that means God is male.⁷

Scriptural authority was also used by some feminist theologians in order to change sexist God language, rather than reinforce it. Letty Russell (1985a) deals with the question of biblical authority as it interacts with feminist issues and believes that divine inspiration means that God can make the story speak to people at any time and/or place, rather than believing that divine inspiration means everything in the Bible is 'right,'

⁶ He says "sons."

⁷ Linda Tschirhart Sanford and Mary Ellen Donovan challenge this understanding of why God is presented as male in the Hebrew Scriptures. They write that Yahweh was declared to be the one god in order to unite the tribes of Israel (which would not be possible if everyone worshiped different gods and goddesses), and that the males in the community made God male in order to secure their own authority (1985, 163).

because she knows that many parts of the Bible are racist, sexist, and/or otherwise problematic and need to be called out as such (140).

In later writings, Letty Russell cited verses and passages that reveal God as Creator, Liberator, and Reconciler, as well as many other names in order to be more inclusive (1974, 96-103). She calls for inclusive God language because of its emancipatory power for people who had previously been excluded (1985b, 592). Rosemary Radford Ruether also calls for inclusive God language to achieve liberation, which is why she calls God “God/ess” (1993, 67-69). Sallie McFague also provides other metaphors for God, like Friend and Mother, because exclusionary God language leads to idolatry and irrelevancy (1982a, 1982b). For McFague, a multitude of ways to understand God is the best way to avoid the formation of idols and irrelevance.

Liberation from oppression is a large theme in feminist discourse. Elizabeth Johnson, in her book *She Who Is*, begins by addressing the social and ethical issues of traditional theology.

While officially it is rightly and consistently said that God is spirit and so beyond identification with either male or female sex, yet the daily language of preaching, worship, catechesis, and instruction conveys a different message: God is male, or at least more like a man than a woman, or at least more fittingly addressed as male than as female... Upon examination it becomes clear that this exclusive speech about God serves in manifold ways to support an imaginative and structural world that excludes or subordinates women. Wittingly or not, it undermines women’s dignity as equally created in the image of God (1992, 4-5).

She continues to discuss the idolatry inherent in using one image of God to the point that “its symbolic and evocative character is lost from view” (Johnson, 1992, 39). Because of the imbalance between male and female imagery for God, Johnson uses mainly female imagery in order to begin “reordering an unjust and deficiently religious situation” and to emphasize the fullness of God (1992, 57).

Other feminist theologians generally reject the traditional male framework of God, and replace it with a female one. Carol Christ (1987) explains that women need the Goddess because the Goddess frees and liberates women in a way that the male God does not (164). Mary Daly (2002) agrees by saying that the Goddess has more potential for healing than a male God has (46-54). Audre Lorde (1984) offers up names of African Goddesses in a critique of Mary Daly's *Gyn/Ecology* in order to show "images of [Lorde's] foremothers in power" (67-68).

All of these people (and more) generated volumes of work involving this topic. The conversation about God and sex/gender continued on to discuss the social problems that occur when religion systematically uplifts one gender while erasing all others.

SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH

In their book *Women and Self-Esteem* (1985), Linda Tschirhart Sanford and Mary Ellen Donovan wrote a chapter about how religion (specifically Judeo-Christian religion, mostly Protestant Christianity) severely damages and erodes the self-esteem of women who are raised under those religions. While discussing the words of their interview participants, they write:

The damage done to women's self-esteem by the belief that only man is created in God's image is incalculable. Every male is instantly, fundamentally affirmed by the belief that God is male and also by the patriarchal practices that follow from it. By contrast, every female is negated (1985, 165)

Similarly, Jann Aldredge-Clanton, in her book *In Whose Image* (1991), takes case studies from her research and explains how women with a male-only view of God tend to be more submissive, more believing of their inferiority to men, and less confident in themselves and their abilities. On the other hand, women who believe in an androgynous or "gender-transcendent" God are more "confident of their ability to achieve goals" and

more likely to be initiators (1991, 72). She emphasizes how masculine God language makes the masculine divine and anything non-masculine (feminine or non-conforming) less-than and not-equal-to.⁸

A lot of research about God and how people form opinions on God has been done by psychologists using either object-relations theory or attachment theory. Object-relations theory stems from psychoanalytic psychology, and purports that humans form unconscious internalized images and predictions of other people's behaviors based on their primary caregiver. These images and understandings are shaped as infants, and are only somewhat reshaped by later life experiences.⁹ Attachment theory deals with long-term relationships between people and the development of an individual, starting with the relationship with the primary caregiver.¹⁰

In her book, *The Birth of the Living God: A Psychoanalytic Study* (1979), Ana-Maria Rizzuto used object-relations theory to understand how images of God are formed. Infants and young children (around two and a half years old) internalize religious understandings and use already existing caregivers to form a representation of God (1979, 44, 179). God representations are used by young children to mediate times of loneliness or parental failure (88-91).

Jane Dickie et al. (1997) show that slightly older children perceive God as the "perfect substitute attachment figure" through their research (27). They conducted two different studies with children 4-11 years old, and asked them to rate mothers, fathers, and God based on illustrations of adjectives. Both times, the results showed that the

⁸ Both books also go into detail about the history of Christianity and the misogyny perpetuated by the early church fathers like Origen, Augustine, and Tertullian (Sanford and Donovan, 1985, 165-166; Aldredge-Clanton, 1990, 42-61).

⁹ See Wachtel (2010) for more information.

¹⁰ See Cassidy and Shaver (2010) for more information.

children's perceptions of their mother and father were related to their perceptions of God (31, 37).

Dickie et al. (2006) went on to show that in adolescents ages 18-22, parents (and their parenting) still have some degree of influence over young adults' perceptions of God, and of themselves. They found that the perceptions of the mother are the most significant factors in predicting God concepts, but most of their participants said that God was "more like a male" (Dickie et al., 2006, 68). This seems to imply that aspects of mothering are ascribed to a male perception of God.

Leona Stucky-Abbott draws from Rizzuto (1979) and argues that the God representation "limits female gender meaning" because all aspects of "mothering" are eventually attributed to "Father" God (Stucky-Abbott, 1993, 243).¹¹ The female child will see herself as opposite of what God is (great, important, powerful, male) which could cause her to be dependent on God in order to achieve qualities "He" has, but she perceives herself as not having (244).

Loius Hoffman finds something similar in his paper presentation "Cultural Constructs of the God Image and God Concept." He breaks down people's experiences of God and discusses perceptions of God by lesbian and gay people, women, and black people. As Stucky-Abbott (1993) outlined, Hoffman finds that

while men are able to derive their value through being made in God's Image and through how they are similar to God, women are placed in a position to derive their value through being different, the other, and dependent (2004, 19).

Hoffman, echoing many of the feminist theologians discussed earlier, also writes:

¹¹ Elizabeth Johnson discusses something similar. She writes that it is problematic to give God "feminine" attributes in order to temper the masculinity, because it further erases the feminine (1992, 48). "Inequality is not redressed but subtly furthered as the androcentric image of God remains in place, made more appealing through the subordinate inclusion of feminine traits" (49).

If the feminine is implicitly determined, in part, by what is not masculine, and God is identified as masculine, then what is feminine is separated from God (2004, 19).

God as male is harmful to the identity formation of females, because they can never see themselves as fully made in God's image. What the feminist theologians have been writing is accurate, as shown by social scientific research. Other research shows how people categorize God and how that influences how they think of "a host of other topics" (Froese and Bader, 2010). And still, other research shows how a masculine image of God is the strongest factor in predicting a conservative ideology surrounding gender (Whitehead, 2012).

The topic of sexist theological language and its impacts was talked about most during the 1980s, and since then the topic's regard has been declining. People are not really writing about gender inclusive theological language anymore. This is why many of my sources are older. Aside from most of them (McFague, Ruether, etc.) being the figures that started the conversation, they are also the people who wrote about theology and gender inclusive language in a focused way, whereas other people are not exclusively focused on these topics. The conversation has moved on, it seems, into other topics of interest. My own research is meant to show how perceptions of God are used on a communal level and individual level, and how inclusive theological language is perceived by people within the community (and how it is enacted by the community). In order to do this, I needed a religious institution that prioritized inclusive language.

THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

Theological Seminary is a school in the northeastern area of the United States of America. I chose Theological Seminary to research because it has an inclusive language policy that all students (and faculty) are meant to adhere to. The inclusive language

policy at Theological Seminary discusses the reasons for inclusive language in two different ways.

One is inclusive ethical language, which means using words like “humankind” instead of “mankind.” It provides reasons for this necessity, mostly in using words like “man” to mean “all people,” everyone who is not male is erased and ignored. Also, it mentions that using language this way perpetuates the idea that men are the most representative for all humans.¹² This echoes the critiques against the English language and grammar that were discussed earlier.

The second way of addressing inclusive language is theological language, which means not using exclusively male or masculine language in reference to God. Instead of using titles like “Father” in reference to God, names like “Mother-Father,” “Creator,” or “Holy One” should be used. It also recommends using second-person pronouns (“You”) instead of third-person pronouns, usually “He/Him,” which are associated with males and masculinity. It explicitly states that using gender neutral theological language does not make God impersonal, because there are many names for God that emphasize relationship without being masculine. It discusses how masculine God language limits women’s abilities to understand themselves as made in God’s image, limits people’s understandings of God, and also perpetuates sexist attitudes in society that women are inherently inferior to men.¹³

For this paper, I will be focusing on the second way of addressing inclusive language. Religious language, particularly theological language, is difficult to change

¹² It does have an issue in this section, as it says “both genders” in one part, implying that there are only two genders and perpetuating the gender binary.

¹³ It also elaborates on Jesus, and states that Jesus’ maleness should not be over-emphasized, but rather the fact that he was human.

because it is seen as coming from outside of the human sphere –that is, it is seen as divinely revealed. Christians would point to the Bible as God revealing how God wants to be named¹⁴, which was shown earlier in the articles by Geffré (1981), Williams (1990), and Achtemeier (1993). If God is revealed as “Father” in the Bible, any attempt to change it would be seen by some as blasphemy (if not heresy).

Clearly some change has already taken place, because the inclusive language policy was created by the institution and people within the seminary are expected to follow it. However, because of the tradition of masculine language in many Christian denominations, it is difficult for a seminary to convince students (only there for an average of three to four years) to completely change the language that they (most likely) grew up with. Even further, if the faculty are not enforcing the policy, and the worship services at the school are also not upholding the policy, it makes changing traditional language that much harder.

Theological Seminary as a whole will be discussed further in the next chapter. At this point, however, the inclusive language policy is the most important aspect of the school, and the main reason why I chose to do research there.

METHODS

For my project, I used mixed methods research. As mentioned earlier, I did participant observation at worship services offered by Theological Seminary for its students as well as people from outside of the seminary community. Theological Seminary has three different chapel services per week, taking place in the middle of the

¹⁴ Similarly, Jews would point to the Hebrew Scriptures, Muslims would point to the Qur’an, Hindus would point to the Vedas, Upanishads, and Puranas, etc.

week. The services are about forty minutes to an hour in length. I attended and coded services from August to December of 2013.

During the participant observation, I used a coding sheet to conduct a content analysis of the service both as it was documented in the bulletin and as it was happening. I took notes on whether there were any discrepancies between the written program and the actual program,¹⁵ and I also had sections for different items of interest: demographics of both congregants and leaders; pronouns for God; names for God; characteristics of God; and sermon notes. In addition, I had a space reserved for general comments on the service.¹⁶

I went to the live services to code the demographics, and then used online video recordings, completed by Theological Seminary and put on their facebook page, to code all other information, in order to not distract congregants in any way. There was some hesitation around my participant observation for fear that I would distract people and take away from their worship experience. Because of this, I was limited in my interactions with participants of services.

I used both the written bulletin to take notes on the service, and I marked places where the written script differentiated from what was actually said during the service. I also kept track of whether the titles, pronouns, and characteristics for God were spoken or sung. I did not code for male God language when a leader was reading from a passage of

¹⁵ Sometimes there were. Often it was just a change in the order of events, but sometimes the written liturgy would include a male name for God, but the speaker would say something different. These moments will be discussed in chapter five.

¹⁶ This is where I marked down problematic elements of the services or potential coding issues, if there were any. Common problems were erasure of mental illness and ableism. Potential coding issues tended to be whether or not to code male God language if the speaker was quoting a Bible verse.

scripture, as many translations use sexist language¹⁷ and I felt that coding for these instances would bias the results too much.¹⁸

However, I did code for masculine God language when the scripture passage was read responsively, meaning that the leader would read an indicated portion of the text and then the congregation would respond. I did this because I felt that making a participant actively read scripture that uses sexist God language aloud reinforces male God concepts even if one attempts to change the male language to gender neutral language.¹⁹ This strategy of making someone read a sentence and speak it out loud is commonly used when trying to teach people either new or difficult concepts because it engages multiple forms and levels of learning –visual and auditory –and, thus, makes the information easier to remember (Sprenger, 2003). For these reasons, I coded the responsive scripture readings.

I also did not code names/titles for God in languages that were not English. There were a number of times during the services, either in songs or in readings, that languages like Spanish, French, or Korean were used instead of English. Due to my unfamiliarity with these languages and the cultures represented by these languages, I did not code for any theological language when English was not being used. This paper is specifically about masculine God language in English, and I would not feel comfortable making claims about other languages.

¹⁷ See Tribble, 1973, 1978.

¹⁸ It should still be noted, however, that Theological Seminary predominantly used sexist translations of Biblical passages, rather than using any available inclusive translations.

¹⁹ This happened occasionally during responsive scripture readings that were heavenly laden with male God-language. Often, however, it was overwhelmingly difficult to change every “he” to “God” (or sometimes “she”) or every “King” to “Creator” in real-time. This will be discussed further in chapter seven.

I also conducted interviews with fifteen people from Theological Seminary. I put up flyers around the school, calling for participants who had attended or helped to plan worship services at the school, and I also added my information to a weekly e-mail newsletter for the students. Additionally, I selectively e-mailed some people to be interviewed. This will be discussed further in the next chapter. Six of the interview participants were congregants of the services and did not help to plan any service at the seminary. Two participants had helped plan about one or two services. Seven of the interview participants consistently helped to lead or decorate or plan for the religious services offered by the seminary.

The interviews usually lasted about forty-five minutes in length, and I asked questions about personal beliefs in God²⁰ and then moved to discuss the services at the seminary.²¹ If the participant had helped to plan the services, I would ask them additional questions about that experience in different ways.²²

The interviews were open-ended, which allowed participants to talk about things that they thought were important, which spanned from issues surrounding mental illness and (invisible) disability in the church to how their theology was changing since entering seminary to issues of race and inequality. I asked follow-up questions for better understanding and, if necessary, prompted the participants for their thoughts and feelings on the inclusive language policy of the seminary.

²⁰ Who or what has taught you the most about God or God's nature throughout your life; can you describe God to the best of your ability; Can you name three main characteristics of God; how do you usually address God.

²¹ How do you usually hear God being addressed in the services; does anything stand out to you in the services as being particularly unique; how often do you attend services here; was there a service that particularly impacted you.

²² What did/do you do to help with the services; what did you want people to learn from your service; what did you want to teach people about God.

In about half of the interviews, the policy was mentioned with no prompting, which allowed for numerous follow up questions dealing with how the participant saw the policy as being acted out, whether it was enforced or not, whether or not they saw it as a good or necessary policy, and generally how the participant felt about it. Discussion about the policy was prompted in seven interviews, and in one interview it was never specifically discussed because the participant was unfamiliar with the policy, as she was a community fellow and never participated in orientation but still attended classes and worship services.

Robert Wuthnow, a sociologist of religion at Princeton University, writes that “talk is cultural work that people do to make sense of their lives and to orient their behavior” (2011, 9). With this understanding, I chose to do interviews in order to better understand how individual beliefs interact with the planning and experience of religious services, and how the talk in the services (specifically the theological language) influences or dialogues with individual beliefs.

One reason for doing participant observation was to be able to have first-hand data about how a community with an inclusive language policy is talking about God, rather than only having materials from interviews. A potential limitation of using this method is that there might have been things I missed, or coded incorrectly. Even so, participant observation seemed to be the best way to get information on how a community discusses God.

One-on-one interviews seemed to be the best way to get information on how individuals think about God. Focus groups would have been a very interesting dimension, especially since that potentially would have brought in more people, but ultimately I

decided against focus groups as I wanted to concentrate on individuals within a community, instead of a small group within a community. In the future, doing a similar study with focus groups included would be interesting, as one could then attempt to analyze how people speak about God to individuals they may or may not know, rather than just how some people speak to an entire congregation.

I also decided against using a survey. One reason for this was because I felt that I needed to limit the amount of data I was collecting, as this is just a master's thesis. I also felt that a survey would not be an adequate way to ask people to describe God, unless all of the response areas were left blank, in which case it would just be a written interview rather than a survey. One limitation of not including surveys in my study is that I have a small sample, and could have potentially had a larger one through an e-mailed survey. However, I felt that I could not get the depth of description through surveys.

Again, interviews seemed to be the best way to engage with individuals about their theological understandings, which are often very nuanced and complicated. I am familiar with conducting interviews, and it is something I enjoy doing. My questions focused on community and individuals, and it seemed fit to do participant observations and interviews to access those social levels. Interviews allowed me to ask questions about religious belief and focus on how people are actually talking about God. Unfortunately, it also limited the number of participants I had in a way that surveys or focus groups potentially would not have done.

Ultimately, in a bigger project with more resources (including at least one other researcher), I would like to use all of these research methods in order to completely analyze a community as a whole: surveys to get a broad response base, participant

observation for communal discussions, focus groups for small group interactions, and interviews for one-on-one conversation about theological understandings. In a project like this, decisions had to be made, and I made the choices I thought would bring the best results for my questions.

DEFINITIONS

God-Images and God-Concepts

When I first began this project, I was using the phrase God images. This seemed to make sense to me, and it was easy enough to explain it to people as long as I emphasized the project was about how the English language influences God images, rather than pictures. Upon doing further research in the literature, I realized I was using the wrong word for what I was researching.²³

The terms God Images and God Concepts were defined by Ana-Maria Rizzuto in her book *The Birth of the Living God: A Psychoanalytic Study* (1979). This work uses objects-relations theory and Freud's psychoanalytic theories to conceptualize an individual's experiences of God based on the attachment to the primary caregiver. She differentiates between the God Concept, or an intellectual understanding of God, and the God Image, which is more of an emotional and experiential understanding of God (47-49).

Louis Hoffman, a psychologist at Saybrook University, further defines these terms in his own work. He explains that the "God Concept develops largely through what a person is taught and what is learned about God" (2004, 3). This is what a person is likely to talk about when asked about God (4). The God Image, however, is emotional, usually unconscious, and it "is seen as derived from early experiences with parents," so it

²³ I realized this before I conducted any interviews, and so it did not influence those result.

is assumed that if the relationship with the parents is sufficiently positive, then the God Image will be positive (9). Hoffman proposes that the God Image can be influenced by multiple factors, not just the initial relationship to the primary caregiver (2004, 11; 2005, 135).

Another factor to understand, according to Hoffman, is that the two are interconnected (2005, 133). “They develop parallel to each other through different aspects of the individual's experience,” he explains (133). He writes:

What parents tell their children about God forms a primary influence on the God Concept while how the child experiences their parents forms the primary basis for the God Image (138).

In this way, the two ideas are connected, and together form the God representation of an individual. Primarily, I believe that my research is reflecting mostly on the God Concepts of my participants. However, there are times that people discuss more emotional experiences of God, which would be their God Image. As stated earlier, the two are interconnected, but it is important to differentiate, since it is much easier to change the God Concept than the God Image.

Gender and Gender-Identity

Gender can be defined as “the social organization of different kinds of bodies into different categories of people” through roles, expressions, and identities which are all both self-defined and socially-defined (Stryker, 2008, 11). Gender is often confused with a person's sex, which refers to a person's genitals, chromosomes, and hormones.²⁴ When a baby is born, it is assigned a gender based on its sex, usually based on the genitals alone, and that gender is socially constructed and reinforced throughout the person's life

²⁴ It is also sometimes confused with sexuality or sexual orientation, which deals with who an individual is attracted to.

through socialization, expectations, stereotypes, and pronouns (Lorber, 2010, 322). Unfortunately, in this society, babies who are assigned male at birth are treated differently, and afforded much more privilege and power throughout their lives than babies assigned female at birth.

In this society, gender is seen as a binary between male (having a penis and XY chromosomes) and female (having a vagina and XX chromosomes). Firstly, this binary ignores anyone born with variation in physical characteristics, or intersex people, which includes ambiguous genitals, reproductive organs, chromosomes, or a combination of those things (Stryker, 2008, 8-9). Secondly, this binary ignores any gender identity that does not neatly fit into its constructs –specifically; it ignores people who are not cisgender. To be cisgender means that the gender you identify with matches the gender you were assigned at birth (Stryker, 2008, 22; Serano, 2010, 442). For instance, I was assigned a female at birth and I identify as female, so I am cisgender. Meanwhile, there are people, known as transgender people,²⁵ whose gender identity does not match the gender they were assigned at birth. There are also gender identities that are non-binary, and these people call themselves many different things –transgender²⁶, genderqueer, gender non-conforming, genderfluid, agender, bigender, third gender, etc.

In this paper, I will be using terms like gender neutral and/or gender inclusive consistently. Gender neutral can be understood as not culturally implying any gender, while gender inclusive can be understood as encompassing at least two genders. For instance, in chapter three when I talk about the names of God (given in worship services

²⁵ Note that “transgender people” is the preferred term used over “transgendered people” or “transgenders,” which is seen as problematic by the trans community. For more information, see Joanne Herman, 2010.

²⁶ Transgender people can hold both binary or non-binary identities.

and individual interview participants), there are gender neutral names, like Creator or Holy One, and gender inclusive names, like Mother/Father God. There are also other names that only imply one gender, often masculine, which will be discussed further in that chapter.

This thesis is a project focusing on gender and theology. It is also a project focusing on inclusivity and, thus, exclusion, because one necessitates the other. My findings show that participants in this religious institution are not nearly as inclusive as its policy dictates. Therefore, this paper contributes to how to do inclusive work, by showing how others have failed at this work.

To do this inclusive work, I will be using a singular “they” or “one,” rather than “he/she,” when referring to a potential or hypothetical person whose pronouns are unknown.²⁷ These “he/she” pronouns are often assumed to be the default, just as heterosexual and cisgender are seen as defaults for people, and I will always attempt to challenge those assumptions. I will be as specific as possible when talking about participants or congregants. The term “women” should be understood as a word that includes any person that identifies as a woman, regardless of their sex. The term “men” should be thought of to include any person that identifies as a man, regardless of physical characteristics. I did not interview anyone who was non-binary, but I did allow space in my coding for people who I suspected were non-binary based on their self-presentation and what I knew about them, and they will simply be referred to as “people.”

²⁷ I will also try not to assume that “he” pronouns necessitate a male or that “she” pronouns necessitate a female, as this is exclusionary to trans or non-binary people who still use those pronouns but do not identify that way. Instead, I will say that these pronouns are associated with or suggest a particular gender, but not that they necessitate them. However, in society, it is understood that “he” means male and “she” means female, and this will be taken into account when discussing pronouns used for God.

As an intersectional feminist, these issues are extremely important to me. While this paper focuses on gender and sexism, no system of oppression is separate from other systems of oppression. When discussing issues around gender and how things and people are gendered, many other issues are also involved, such as sexism, cissexism,²⁸ transphobia,²⁹ identity, sexuality, disability, race, etc. These intersections will be touched on, but because of issues of time and length they cannot be the main focus. However, that does not mean that they should not be discussed at all.

In this paper, I will attempt to be as inclusive as possible. This means that I will not use cissexist or transphobic language. I will not use racist or ableist language. If I expect others to be inclusive and to do better inclusive work, I should hold myself to the same standards.

Diversity, Tolerance, and Inclusivity

When discussing the idea that all people should be welcome, three words are often employed: diversity, tolerance, inclusivity. The problem with these terms is that they tend to get jumbled up in discussion, and then they are hard to take apart again. Because this paper discusses topics regarding inclusivity, the terms will be discussed in-depth.

Diversity means “the state of having people who are different races or who have different cultures in a group or organization” according to the Merriam-Webster dictionary. I would expand the definition to also include people of different genders, ability levels, citizenship, nationality, and, in the instance of Theological Seminary,

²⁸ Cissexism can be defined, for the purposes of this paper, as the belief that genders which are trans or non-binary are inherently inferior to genders which are cis. See Faktor 2011 and Serano 2010.

²⁹ Transphobia can be defined as a variety of negative attitudes regarding transgender people, based on their gender identity. See Hill 2002, Sugano et al 2006, Nagashi et al 2008, and Serano 2010.

denominational and theological backgrounds, as well as other distinctions. This word was used a lot by my interview participants when describing the atmosphere of the seminary as a whole. It was often used in very close relationship to the word ‘inclusive.’

Diversity does not necessitate an inclusive environment. When women were first allowed into American colleges that were previously all-male, the diversity went up exponentially, but that does not mean that those women felt included and accepted for who they were in that environment. The same goes for when black people were admitted into colleges; there was still rampant racism in America and there still is. Diversity does not necessitate inclusivity.

Tolerance, as defined by the dictionary, means “willingness to accept feelings, habits, or beliefs that are different from your own.” Tolerance is sometimes used like a “get-out-of-jail-free” card when people with narrow views assume that they should be free to believe whatever they want, and attempt to use the word to protect themselves from the criticism of others who disagree with them. This is not an accurate rendering of tolerance, because tolerance is not the same as relativism, as in “all beliefs are equal, no matter what those beliefs are.” Someone can be tolerant and still critique anti-LGBTQPIA+³⁰ views. Doing this does not make them intolerant; it makes them supportive of themselves and others in that group, or it makes them an ally if they are not within that group.

To be inclusive is to be “open to everyone,” according to the dictionary. The opposite would be exclusive or selective, narrow, limited. However, this word needs further nuance in its definition. This word should be understood, at least in terms of my usage for this project, as meaning open to everyone regardless of their self-constructed

³⁰ Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer/Questioning, Pansexual, Intersex, Asexual, and others

identity or socially-constructed identity. This means being inclusive of LGBTQPIA+ people, disabled people, people of color, poor people, people who are oppressed based on their gender or non-gender, etc. Inclusive work should privilege the oppressed over the oppressor, because so often they (the oppressed) are the excluded. It should also include the oppressor, the privileged, the powerful –but never at the expense of the people who are oppressed.

Similarly to tolerance, in my understanding, someone can be inclusive and still critique the beliefs or views of other people –especially if those beliefs are hostile towards marginalized groups. Inclusion means that everyone feels accepted and included, but inclusivity must support the oppressed and must enlighten the oppressor, especially since those identities often overlap. An individual can be both oppressor and oppressed at the same time.

For instance, as a cisgender white woman, I am both oppressor and oppressed. I have privilege over people of color and trans people, but cisgender white men, and even some men of color, have privilege over me. This means that when issues of sexism come up, I can talk about my experiences fairly freely if I am in a space I think is safe. However, when topics like racism or cissexism are being discussed, I can only be an ally, and my voice should not be heard over people who experience those oppressions daily. I can also use my privilege to build more inclusivity by speaking out against racism or cissexism when I see it, as well as other forms of oppression.

Issues of privilege complicate matters of inclusion, tolerance, and diversity. Issues of privilege complicate every aspect of human life. Privilege and oppression are not mutually exclusive, and systems of oppression are intersectional and overlapping.

Nothing is simple, and that needs to be remembered even as definitions are listed and explanations given.

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

Chapter two focuses on the demographics and atmosphere of Theological Seminary. Several things stand out to the students about the school: the family environment, the safety of challenging beliefs, and the diversity. Within the worship services, the school's dedication to social justice and enthusiasm towards incorporating different cultures is clear.

Chapter three discusses names for God given in worship services and by interview participants. Many names for God are gender neutral, but there are some issues with names that only imply masculinity. Moving from this dilemma, chapter four talks about how God is described using characteristics and character traits.

Chapter five discusses the inclusive language policy and how the interview participants frame and think about it. It also discusses moments in worship that masculine theological language was changed during the service. Finally, chapter six talks about the difficulty of changing traditional understandings of God.

CHAPTER TWO

“When I was first here, we had a group who was really intentional about making sure a wide variety of voices were heard, a wide variety of bodies were being seen and used, and we were hearing scripture in languages other than English, we were seeing it enacted with bodies... or with art. And that has really trailed away and it just, it drives me nuts to hear the same voices, like literally the same voices reading scripture every time I go to chapel which is now not... not that often, because it’s just, it feels like the same old, same old. Which is really disappointing, because I loved it so much. And now it’s just like passé... and I think that you can see it in the chapel attendance, and even I think the leadership -people don’t seem to be excited to be worshipping together.” Isabelle Grey, December 4, 2013.

“Absolutely -it’s amazing that every day we do something different, ‘cause the average church does service once a week, four services a month... and they all look the same.” Lina Santos, December 12, 2013.

The two quotes above are only small samples of the differences in responses between interview participants when I asked them to talk to me about the worship services. Often, regarding the worship services, the responses fell into a few different categories, like liturgy, aesthetics, and music, but general discussion about the variety of the services (or lack of variety, in some cases) were also had. Among these ideas, there were some disconnects between how the participants responded, as illustrated above. Even with a small sample size, the ranges in responses are complex and nuanced, and will be discussed further after outlining more information about Theological Seminary broadly.

When asked to describe the seminary as a whole, a few themes became distinct throughout the interviews: variety, diversity, familial environment, and a sense of safety while dealing with challenging beliefs. These themes were discussed by the participants

separately and emerged as similar topics during my coding of interviews. Within the worship services, the school showed a commitment to social justice issues and an interest in incorporating multiple cultures in services.

DEMOGRAPHICS

Theological Seminary as a whole has about 400 students, with slightly more women than men (58% to 42%). The student population is mostly white (around 58%), 20% are Black or African American, and another 20% are Asian-American or Asian international students. There is also a small Latino/Latina population. The demographic data for the school was available online from various sources, but I am not citing it as part of maintaining some anonymity.

For the chapel services, however, I had to rely on cultural coding and gender attribution for the demographics. In short, this means that I had to rely on my own understanding of what different races/ethnicities look like, and compare that to what the congregants at the services looked like, as well as relying on my personal knowledge of the congregants. I also had to categorize people as male, female, or unknown, which is gender attribution (based on gender presentation).

This is problematic because it relies heavily on a subjective and cultural understanding of what gender and race/ethnicity are, and what they look like. All this to say that there is the potential that I accidentally misgendered someone or mistakenly categorized someone in the wrong race or ethnicity when taking down demographics for worship services. However, because I could not do anything to distract or take away from the worship of others, as explained in the first chapter, my options in this area were limited.

The chapel services that I coded, on average, were attended by more women than men (55% to 45%). White women specifically were the average largest demographic group for the congregation (30%), both white men and black/African American women each made up about 17% of the congregation, both black/African American men and Asian/Asian American men made up about 13% of the congregation each, Asian/Asian American women made up 7% of chapel congregations, and Latinas made up 3%. These numbers are coming from my own coding of data from my participant observation. The percentages of groups changed for each service, as different people attended or did not, but when viewed by month, these are the average statistics.

Worship leaders were often students in a small class focused on planning services. Speakers in the services were organized by the Chaplain and could be anyone from inside or outside the institution, but the students in this class were utilized for scripture readings, prayers, or decorating the space. The leaders of the chapel services tended to be women (54%) rather than men (46%). On average, white women were leaders of services about 29% of the time. White men were leaders 17% of the time, black/African American men 16% of the time, Asian/Asian American men 12% of the time, black/African American women 10% of the time, Asian/Asian American women 8% of the time, Latinas 6% of the time, and Latinos were leaders less than 1% of the time. . So these statistics match the percentages of those attending fairly closely.

To gather demographic data from my interview participants, each person filled out a general demographics sheet after each interview. As mentioned earlier, my interview sample is small. I interviewed fifteen people from Theological Seminary. According to online sources referenced earlier, there are over 400 students at the

seminary. Thirteen of my participants had received or are in the process of acquiring their Master of Divinity degree, and only two participants were in different programs.¹ I was not trying to get a sample for Master of Arts students or Ph.D. students; I aimed for a sample of people who want to work in the field of ministry. However, there are still other issues with my sample.

I interviewed mostly women (73%). I interviewed eight white women (54%), four white men (27%), two black women (13%), and 1 Latina (6%). Obviously, my participants were predominantly white, and predominantly female. This is mostly due to lack of responses from diverse groups. I sent out e-mails to people of color who were taking the worship class mentioned earlier, and received limited responses, as shown in my sample.

In a longer and larger project, where I would be doing more than fifteen interviews with more time than two months, I would hope to be able to reach out to more diverse groups of people –including racial/ethnic diversity, LGBTQPIA+ people, disabled people, etc. –and build rapport with them. As it is, my pool of interview participants is mostly white, heterosexual, able-bodied, and female. Because of this, my results are affected.

With more people, and specifically more diverse people, I could have interviewed individuals who viewed God in particular ways, either as male or female, for instance, or neither. I could have also had more participants who struggled with inclusive language in some way, or others who agree or disagree with it passionately. Perhaps more people are unsatisfied with the school or with the worship service, or maybe there are more people

¹ One was getting a Master of Ministry degree, and the other was a Community Fellow with intentions to join a degree program soon.

who like it. Because my sample is small and not representative of the school as a whole, generalizable statements cannot be made, but I am able to provide some insights and perspectives from a range of students.

Regarding my interview participants, nine of them were United Methodist, and six of them affiliated themselves with other denominations including Lutheran, Catholic, Quaker, Episcopal, and Baptist. The ages of the participants ranged from 24-64, with the mean being 40.6 years old. Additionally, of my participants, three were in their first year of study, three were in their second year, four were in their third year, three were in their fourth year, one was in their fifth year (or more), and one person did not put a year of study.

ATMOSPHERE OF THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

In my interviews, I asked participants to describe the atmosphere of the school as a whole. The diversity of the school was mentioned on multiple occasions, as was the sense of family and/or community. It was also mentioned as a place to “work through a lot of theology” and “ask a lot of hard questions.”² Less often, it was mentioned as having a leaning towards social justice issues, and was said to be focused on ordination with an “undercurrent of... competition.”³

Diversity

When diversity was mentioned by the interview participants, it was often in reference to the amount of students of color on campus and/or the amount of international students. Some people also mentioned the amount of LGBTQPIA+ people (and allies) on campus, which they said contributed to the diversity within Theological Seminary. When

² Jonathan Key, December 4, 2013.

³ Julia Summers, December 3, 2013.

describing the school, Josiah Harris told me that he was impressed with the “diversity of races and ages and backgrounds... [and the] sincerity and integrity of the students.”⁴

This diversity allows the worship services to be open to reading scripture in different ways –in different languages –as mentioned by Lina Santos.⁵ Diversity also forces the school to contemplate how it should best show inclusivity towards the students. Kerry Matthews said “this place thinks about things that probably most people in general society wouldn’t think about too long,” specifically on race issues and LGBTQPIA+ issues.⁶

Gabriel Porter picked up on this same idea in a more nuanced way. When asked about the school in general, he told me that there is “liberationist and feminist stuff happening here.”⁷ He explained that this had more to do with the social justice and/or ethical commitments of Theological Seminary that “touch every area of the school,” while at the same time there are “lots of people [here] who have various ideas about God,” which inform the theological commitments of the school.⁸

For both Kerry and Gabriel, Theological Seminary’s ideas about what has importance, what needs to be considered, are influenced by its diverse population. Both participants mentioned the interest in racial issues and LGBTQPIA+ issues within the seminary as they perceived it, while simultaneously discussing issues of diversity.

Feeling of Family

The family atmosphere that was described could be referring to two different ideas. One is that the people at the school are like a family, and the other is that it could

⁴ December 5, 2013.

⁵ December 12, 2013.

⁶ November 11, 2013.

⁷ November 14, 2013.

⁸ Gabriel Porter, November 14, 2013.

be an acknowledgement of the fact that there are a lot of families at the school. In fact there is a small playground outside of family dorms so that young children can play together and never have to leave campus. Throughout the interviews, references to the family atmosphere might be a mix of both understandings, though they seem to be more of an acknowledgement of the camaraderie in the school, rather than the actual amount of families.

This sense of familial connection was also emphasized in chapel services. In one of the first services of the semester, a dean of the school began her sermon with, “Welcome back... it’s good to have you home. And if you’re new... just know that you’re home.”⁹ This sense of connection and family extended beyond genealogy and blood relatives, and was emphasized by many different people.

It must be mentioned that beyond reinforcing a familial connection, chapel services also supported the actual families in the community by having special children’s services. In the Fall, there was one such service where songs like “Rise and Shine” were sung and danced to, children had a special section at the front of the chapel where they could interact, and a baby was dedicated. Babies and small children sometimes attend the services throughout the semester, and the annual Advent service is also quite oriented towards children.¹⁰ Other children’s services from before the fall were spoken about by interview participants, including one where communion was served by a baby holding a bowl of goldfish instead of bread. All of this emphasized the actual families within the community as well as a sense of family and connection beyond relatives.

⁹Worship Service, September 4, 2013.

¹⁰ The Advent service on December 5, 2013, included people releasing glitter over the audience to create a ‘snow’ effect, which children then rolled around in and threw at each other afterwards. Some adults participated in this as well.

Struggle with Challenging Beliefs

It was acknowledged in a variety of ways that this school is where people can question, change, alter, or work through their own beliefs. It was seen as a “safe space” to work through questions about faith before entering ministry.¹¹ Kimberly Marshall expressed her relief when she came to Theological Seminary, because she felt that she was allowed to work through “non-orthodox” thoughts and ideas.¹² A young woman named Julia Summers in particular was dealing with what claiming her invisible disability¹³ would mean for her theology:

This is really a place where you can claim your identity... I really felt that it was okay to have a disability and I really felt that it was okay to claim that and see what it meant for my theology¹⁴.

She said, however, that it was difficult to do that sometimes, especially when you are “not in a mediated place, when you’re struggling through what it means to be diverse.”¹⁵

From this, Julia spoke about a perceived atmosphere of competition in the school. She spoke of an “us vs. them” mentality between the Methodist students and the non-Methodist students, as well as along racial/ethnic lines. Another student, Lina Santos, also spoke of similar differences between Methodist students and non-Methodist students, and expressed her desire for non-Methodist students to feel safer to share their beliefs, as the lack-of-sharing “translates into relationships,” harkening back to the metaphor of the

¹¹ Jonathan Key, December 4, 2013.

¹² December 12, 2013.

¹³ Disability can be understood as a condition (physical or mental) that limits a person in movements, senses, or activities. An invisible disability, then, can be understood as a disability that cannot be seen just by looking at a person, and they would be presumed to be able-bodied.

¹⁴ December 3, 2013.

¹⁵ Julia Summers, December 3, 2013.

seminary students as a family.¹⁶ Both Julia and Lina are United Methodist denominationally.

ATMOSPHERE OF WORSHIP SERVICES

I asked my interview participants to talk about the worship services at the school, and particularly asked if they thought there was anything unique or special about these services (especially when compared to other services they have been to). Often, the responses fell into a few different categories: music, aesthetics, and liturgy. Other variations in responses will be discussed as well.

Aesthetics

The aesthetics of the worship space were mentioned multiple times throughout the interviews, but of the three topic groups it was mentioned the least. Three people mentioned the altar as being unique to the seminary. Before the services, the altar is decorated in fabrics of different colors, sometimes with candles, books, vases, pictures, or other objects on top. The altar is decorated differently for every service, depending on the theme for the day and who is doing the dressing. One interview participant called it “visual art.”¹⁷

Other people noted the “intentionality of the wooden space, the intentionality of nature,” since the actual space of the chapel is made of wood and surrounded by windows that allow congregants to see outside. Edward Myles expressed the distress he feels when the shades of the chapel were down, and mentioned that he actively tried to make sure

¹⁶ December 12, 2013.

¹⁷ Brenda Winfield, December 2, 2013.

that the shades were up before worship began so that he could see outside. This, he said, helped him feel closer to God.¹⁸

Music

Music was mentioned constantly throughout the interviews as one of the aspects that makes the services at Theological Seminary unique. Twice it was the first thing mentioned without hesitation when that question was asked.¹⁹ In one interview, Kimberly Marshall spoke about visiting campus and going to a worship service. She said, “I loved it, I loved the music.”²⁰ Gabriel Porter talked about how singing the songs together makes him feel connected to the congregation and the community as a whole.²¹ Others talked about how the music moved them in worship, or as Kerry Matthews said, it gets her “in the zone.”²²

Music was also noted when discussing inclusiveness. Brenda Winfield talked about how she noticed that some people –including the music director who often leads songs in worship –would change the pronouns of God in songs from “he” to “she” or “God” in order to be more inclusive.²³ This also happens within liturgy as well. There were numerous occasions where individual congregants would attempt to change a very sexist responsive reading to be more inclusive, and there were also times that the speaker for the day would change masculine God language to be gender neutral. This will be talked about in more detail in chapter five.

¹⁸ December 12, 2013.

¹⁹ Kerry Matthews, November 11, 2013; Julia Summers, December 3, 2013.

²⁰ December 12, 2013.

²¹ November 14, 2013.

²² November 11, 2013.

²³ December 2, 2013.

The liturgy itself was not seen to be as spiritually moving as the music was, but more of an area to gather resources. Generally, the liturgy of any given service, most specifically services involving communion, was re-written somewhat, either to be more inclusive or shortened for time considerations. Sometimes, the liturgy –while usually printed in the bulletin in English –would be led by someone who would speak it in their native language, or sometimes a second language that was not English. This often occurred with scripture readings. Regularly, the liturgy would call for open responses from the congregation, rather than written responses that the people had to read aloud. This also occurred with prayers –the leader would ask a question, and the congregation would respond with whatever they were thinking. This, the “participation of the congregation,” was mentioned in one of the interviews as a great thing and as something that set the seminary apart from other places.²⁴ Generally, the variety presented through the liturgical work was seen as a good thing. Some interview participants, however, did not agree that this variety was always a good thing, or even that there was variety within the services at all.

Variety

Kerry Matthews said that she used to think that the variety of the liturgy (most likely referring to the re-written liturgy for communion) was a good thing, “but I’m starting to find out that gets to be distracting.” She also pointed out that “there’s no uniformity in the worship –there’s a uniformity in the structure... but all the words are often different... so is that beneficial?”²⁵

²⁴ Kimberly Marshall, December 12, 2013.

²⁵ November 11, 2013.

This is similar to what Jonathan Key brought up, though he was talking about uniformity within the congregation rather than the services. Jonathan referenced the fact that, in services, when the congregation is asked to pray Jesus' prayer, it is often said to speak it in the language in which you are most familiar. He said,

I like the inclusiveness, but I don't like when we're... I understand the concept of praying the "Our Father" in our own tongues, but it never feels unified to me... I don't mind saying our father, I don't mind saying our divine, I don't mind praying in Spanish... I just -it would be, I don't know... the togetherness of praying.²⁶

For obvious reasons, this recalls earlier discussions about family and diversity being important aspects of Theological Seminary. While both Kerry and Jonathan are struggling with diversity and negotiating a diverse congregation, they are also dealing with inclusivity and how a congregation can be inclusive. Both of them are critiquing the congregation for the way it has shown itself to be inclusive –either through re-written liturgy to be more gender inclusive, or by allowing everyone to speak their native language while praying. By critiquing the services in this way, they are revealing how they wish the services to be held. To Jonathan, togetherness is far more important than repetition. For Kerry repetition is ideal. Both of them are struggling with the diversity of the congregation in very different ways, and they are also struggling with inclusivity.

This struggle is more obvious in Jonathan's quote, as he specifically mentions the inclusive aspect of this practice (of having everyone say the prayer together in their native languages). He knows that to be inclusive, you cannot mandate one single language, especially in a diverse community that has people from all over the world. However, for him, the togetherness and unity of a congregation has significant meaning. This is Jonathan's struggle in this quote.

²⁶ December 4, 2013.

Kerry is also struggling with inclusivity but at a different level. Jonathan was approaching inclusivity at the congregational level, but Kerry is approaching it from a liturgical level. To really see her struggle with inclusivity, specifically with inclusive language, it helps to know that directly after talking about the variety of the services and how they are distracting, Kerry said:

So, I've never been able to glam on to anything as having spiritual or religious meaning... and say "that's for me," because it's always so neutral -you know, genderized, neutral, inclusive, careful, careful, careful, careful...²⁷

For Kerry, it is difficult to have a variety of services presented because they are distracting and fleeting. It is hard for her to grasp onto any one thing as something she could use, either when she leads congregations in the future, or for her own spiritual life. She also equates inclusive language to neutral language, to careful language. This is a hint towards the theme that we will see in chapter five, an idea that if God language is gender neutral, it is also impersonal.

In contrast to those struggling with the variety presented in the services as a negative thing on various levels, others say that there is no variety at all. Three of my interview participants had been at Theological Seminary for four years or more at the time of the interview, and they were able to talk about the worship services with a sense and view of time that was not present in participants who had only been there for three years or less.²⁸

Isabelle Grey, the woman who was quoted at the beginning of this chapter, was very upset by the lack of variety in the services. She said "but, five years in, it's all the

²⁷ November 11, 2013.

²⁸ They were also all United Methodist denominationally.

same. It's the same prayer, same flavor, same."²⁹ She explained about how the community had been more intentional about being diverse and inclusive and using those differences in productive ways through worship. "It's not what it was," she said, "and that makes me sad. And it makes it hard to encourage others to go."³⁰

While Isabelle was speaking about worship services broadly, Kimberly Marshall spoke about how it seemed like there was a "little bit less variety in how we talk about God in chapel and in general than there was when I first came."³¹ Brenda Winfield seconded that thought in her interview by mentioning that "there isn't a variety of names for God," whereas when she first to the school, the services "used to be very intentional,"³² which seemed to echo back to what Isabelle Grey said about the past intentional community.

These women are talking about slightly different forms of variety. Isabelle Grey is talking about the lack of variety in diversity shown in the services themselves. She talks about the bodies, the voices, and the people. Kimberly and Brenda, however, are talking about the lack of variety in naming God. Isabelle Grey echoed this later in her interview, saying that masculine names for God are used too often with no feminine.³³ However, Isabelle Grey was the only participant in my study who critiqued the actual amount of diversity (of people) shown in the services by saying there was too little, and that there could be more.

²⁹ December 4, 2013.

³⁰ December 4, 2013.

³¹ December 12, 2013.

³² December 2, 2013.

³³ Isabelle Grey, December 4, 2013.

DISCUSSION

Theological Seminary has a rich atmosphere and diverse populace. Students are negotiating how to be inclusive in a diverse environment, at the level of the school and the worship services. Several things stand out to the students about the school: the family environment, the safety of challenging beliefs, and the diversity. Further, the school's social justice orientation and commitment to inclusivity by incorporating different cultures is evident in the worship services.

At the individual level, the differences in how people interpret issues of diversity, variety, and inclusivity are clear in how they discuss the atmosphere of the school and worship services. There seems to be some denominational pull in how people are identifying these issues, as shown by Kerry Matthews and Jonathan Key. And length of time at the school also seems to have some influence in how students see the services, shown by Brenda Winfield, Isabelle Grey, and Kimberly Marshall. This struggle and disagreement over inclusivity and diversity will be seen over and over again in future chapters discussing God and how each person thinks about God, and how God is presented in worship services.

CHAPTER THREE

“[The Inclusive Language Policy is] not enforced like it should be [in worship]... and definitely not inclusive language, like, including feminine dimensions of God. I feel like the majority of the language is either masculine language or attempts at gender-neutral language” Isabelle Grey, December 4, 2013.

I still remember one particular chapel service that was at the beginning of the semester. It was a celebration of women, and women leaders. This service was particularly uplifting as it had no male names or titles for God, even in songs, and generally presented God as gender neutral. Three women spoke and gave their testimonies and it was so inspiring to see and hear these empowered women talk about their lives.

And then, at the very end of the service, one of the speakers said the closing prayer. “In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.”¹ Ritual language revealed how automatic sexist language is. Even with clear intentions, masculine ways of naming God are ever present, and without thought of the consequences, are frequently unconsciously invoked. And I realized my own investment in the issues, for I will never forget how everyone around me stood and mingled while I sat in shock and frustration over the closing prayer. No one else seemed to notice any problem.

This chapter discusses the names and titles attributed to God both in worship services at Theological Seminary and by the individual participants within that community. For this work, names and titles can be understood as words by which

¹ Worship Service, September 25, 2013.

something (in this case, God) is known or referred to. This chapter only deals with the spoken names for God used in the services, not titles that were sung or used in songs. This is due to space reasons, and also because the liturgy can be more easily changed (and was changed more often) in the middle of a service than words to songs printed in a hymnal, although it was clear at times that people and/or worship leaders were using other words.²

WORSHIP SERVICES

In my participant analysis of the worship services at Theological Seminary, I found that there were at least thirty three different names for God out of 884 mentions. The majority of the names used were gender-neutral. The most used name for God was that of “God,” which was mentioned 605 times, and although this would seem to confirm some success in the inclusive language policy, it is worth further discussion.

The first issue is the type of word “God” is in English grammar. The word god/s or God is both a common noun, naming a group of similar things, and a proper noun, a name of a single person, place, or thing. Because of this, the word “God” can be used when directly addressing God in prayer, when talking about God, when differentiating between gods, etc. The title “God” is literally the word people who speak English use to talk about God. Because of this, it is obviously going to be used the most out of any other title.³

The second issue with the word “God” and how frequently it was used is that it is often used in place of pronouns in inclusive environments. Instead of saying “he” or “himself,” people say “God” or “Godself,” in order to keep God seemingly gender-

² This will be discussed more in chapter five.

³ Thus, it could be seen as biasing the data.

neutral. Its use does not necessarily indicate that the speaker sees God in gender neutral ways, as the seminary has not moved to using gender neutral pronouns like they/them, ze/hir, or xe/xem.⁴ Because of these facts, the name “God” is used far more than any other name or title.

It is difficult to discern however, whether or not “God” is actually a gender neutral term. As briefly discussed in chapter one, many feminists have found issue with the grammatical fact that when pairs of opposites exist (like God and Goddess, for instance), one is seen as neutral (semantically unmarked) while the other is not neutral (semantically marked). Usually, it is the masculine form that is unmarked, while the feminine form is marked. This allows the masculine form to operate as a general and comprehensive term, while limiting the feminine to refer only to the female.⁵ This supports an idea that the male form of anything is the neutral, the default, and the norm, such as actor, waiter, hero (Graddol and Swann, 1989, 99-101).⁶

Traditionally, the God of Christianity has been seen as male, and terms such as Father, Lord, and King are used.⁷ This is due to the predominance of masculine names for God in the Bible, and the pronoun “he,” which is seen as representing a man in this culture.⁸ Within the services, God was referred to as “he” in six separate services, for a total of 53 times that the pronoun he was used to refer to God throughout the services.⁹ Of these six services, one was designed by an English as a Second Language class,

⁴ For more information, see Feinberg, 1996.

⁵ As in, the word God can refer to male or female gods, but the word Goddess can only refer to female gods/goddesses (not male).

⁶ However, it must also be questioned if it is correct to assume that God is male simply because Goddess is female, since this can be seen as falling back into the gender binary.

⁷ This was also discussed in the first chapter.

⁸ As explained in chapter one, I will try not to make the assumption that “he” means male, in order to be trans inclusive, but it must be understood that in this culture “he” means male most of the time.

⁹ Worship services, September 10, 2013; October 22, 23, 24 2013; November 12, 2013.

another was a Cross-Cultural Experience class that spoke about Native American cultures, another was run by the Black/African American group in the seminary who brought in an outside speaker for the service, one was led by a professor of the seminary, and two used Episcopal liturgy and Episcopal pastors from outside of the seminary. The first Episcopal service used “he” fourteen times, “Lord” ten times, and “Father” five times in reference to God.¹⁰ The English as a Second Language Class used “he” thirteen times, and “Lord” seven times.¹¹ The second Episcopal service, with a liturgy designed by the Episcopal students on campus, used “he” twelve times, “Lord” nineteen times, “Father” once, and “King” once.¹² The service organized by the Black/African American group and led by a pastor outside the seminary used “he” ten times, “Lord” thirty times, and “Father” twice.¹³ The other two services, one led by the professor and the other led by the cross cultural class, both used “he” twice, the former using “Lord” eight times, and the latter using “Father” once.¹⁴

Masculine God References	“he”	Lord	Father	King	Grandfather
ESOL class	13	7			
Black/African American Group	10	30	2		
Episcopal Service 1	14	10	5		
Episcopal Service 2	12	19	1	1	
Prof Led	2	8			
(Native Amer.) Cross Cultural Class	2		1		2
Total for these six services	53	74	9		

¹⁰ Worship service, October 22, 2013.

¹¹ Worship service, September 10, 2013.

¹² Worship service, November 14, 2013.

¹³ Worship service, November 12, 2013.

¹⁴ Worship services, October 2, 2013, October 24, 2013.

As shown above, services with denominations that emphasize masculine God language, like the Episcopal denomination, have a high number of masculine references to God. Similarly, services which are student led, often with marginalized racial groups, tend to have more masculine God language as well. God was never called “she” in these services. Because of the cultural understanding of “he” meaning male, this reinforces the idea of God as male in the services, hence calling into question the neutrality of God references in those services.

Theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether (1993) makes a switch from calling God “God” to calling God “God/ess” (67). She does this in order to shatter “the male monopoly on God-language” (67). Nelle Morton (1985), a Drew University professor emeritus, however, writes about how theological language assumes the male, and how some terms leave that assumption unquestioned. In explicit opposition to male/female God language, she writes:

I see male/female God language as an attempt to appease both sides while leaving untouched the image of the male God... It gives the false impression of having arrived when it merely supports the status quo because it has not touched the image out of which daily living takes place... But to substitute Goddess, an exclusively female image... in the place of God immediately confronts the maleness of God (151)

Similarly, Mary Daly (2002) writes in her article “The Qualitative Leap Beyond Patriarchal Religion” that “The word “God” just may be inherently oppressive” (51). It must also be mentioned, however, that Mary Daly was extremely cissexist and transphobic, at least in her writings and in the writings of people she advised, and so she is not concerned with gender in the same way I am when questioning the potential masculinity of the word “God” (Stryker, 2008, 105-106).

The word God could also reflect a desire to move beyond gendered language. For some, God is neither male nor female when they use this word. This tends to come across in many interviews, as many participants indicate that they believe the word “God” is gender neutral, and is a move away from masculine language for them. Others said that they do not see God in anthropomorphic terms, or that they see God as spirit. This will be discussed further in the next section.

Due to the problems and concerns with coding the word “God” as a name for God, I am not going to code it as masculine or gender neutral. I will provide information for both ideas, but ultimately, I will not say that the word “God” is either masculine or gender neutral. There is too much discrepancy and, at different times and contexts (and for different people) this word functions as both masculine and/or gender neutral. Again, I will provide information for both of these ideas throughout my work, but will not argue either way.

The second most-used title for God was “Lord,” used a total of 155 times in thirty seven services. Aside from God, Lord is the most predominant name used in the services in reference to God. It was used more times than all other names for God (excluding God) combined.

Lord comes from “hlaforð” (which originated from *hlāfweard*) an Old English word with Germanic base meaning “bread-keeper.” Lord has been used throughout history to denote a relationship between two people, often with a stratified system of (social, economic) power, like in feudalism. A lord is someone who has power over someone else, or has power over/owns a space of land (which would be granted to the lord’s vassal by the lord). In medieval Europe, women could not own anything –they

were, rather, something to be owned. Before marriage, women and girls were owned by their fathers. After marriage, they were owned by their husbands (Fiorenza, 2004, 196).¹⁵ Lord is a term that primarily applies to men of a high class,¹⁶ whereas the term lady is used for the women married to the men called lords (Fiorenza, 2004, 42).¹⁷

Once again the grammatical structure in English of marked and unmarked opposites is present in lord and lady, just as it was in God and Goddess. However, in this case, I will support the idea that “Lord” is a masculine term, as there is less debate about that. Indeed, many feminist theologians include “Lord” in masculine titles for God,¹⁸ and my interview participants did not use the word “Lord” as gender neutral, as they did with “God.”

The third-most used name for God, “Father,” was only used 2% of the times God was named.¹⁹ “Father” was used 18 times to allude to God. Sometimes the term would be defined with heavenly, holy, or loving in front of father, but mostly it was just “Father” alone. Five of these times was in reference to Jesus’ prayer, which begins “Our Father, who art in heaven”²⁰, and four of the times was because of the phrase “in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit” often said at the end of prayers, benedictions, or blessings, like the one mentioned at the beginning of the chapter. Obviously, this

¹⁵ An old meaning for lord is husband, or master of the household. This is interesting because there are many Bible verses that place God in the role of husband, and it could be one reason why “Lord” was used in Bible translations (beyond the fact that lords have absolute authority).

¹⁶ Some women can have the title of lord, as the Queen of England has the title “Lord of Mann,” because she is the head of the state on the Isle of Man. But, predominantly, it is a male title.

¹⁷ Fiorenza goes into more detail about the intersections of oppression with the terms lord and lady, as she discusses how the “lady/mistress/mother is ‘the other’ of the lord/master/father whereas all other women who are marked ‘inferior’ by race, class, religion, or culture are the ‘others of the other’” (Fiorenza, 2004, 42).

¹⁸ Johnson, 1992; Fiorenza, 2004; McFague, 1982b.

¹⁹ Or, if the term “God” is bracketed, it was used 6% of the time God was named.

²⁰ It was also commonly noted in the bulletin as the “Lord’s Prayer” but was often not called that in the service, instead being called “the prayer that Jesus has taught us” or other such things. This can be seen as an attempt to move beyond gendered references of Jesus, but not so much God.

reinforces the idea that God is male, because “father” is a title given to men, rather than women, who have had offspring.

In contrast, “Mother” was used once, and that was in conjunction with “Father.”²¹ Even the word “Grandfather” was used twice as a term for God. To rephrase this, a stereotypically female familial name was used once to refer to God, while two different stereotypical male familial names were used twenty times. This does not seem like much, especially since God was named 884 times, or 279 times if the term “God” is bracketed. But when the services are observed as a whole, male names for God are used far more than feminine names for God. Indeed, in this one case of “Mother” being used, it was used in conjunction with “Father,” making the double title gender inclusive by emphasizing both masculine and feminine aspects of God. This is the only occurrence of an explicitly gender inclusive title for God, and it was said in a prayer by someone from outside of the institution.

The use of the title “Mother” for God can be problematic for other reasons, as Esther McIntosh, a professor of Education and Theology at York St. John University, points out that the title (of Mother) “places undue emphasis on the biology of women, valorizing their capacity for motherhood and marginalizing the infertile and childless” (2007, 248). I would also add that it marginalizes and excludes (trans)women who do not have a uterus, and thus cannot become pregnant at all. This biological essentialism could also be seen as a problem for the term “Father,” but there are a few social differences that do not make the masculine term as problematic.²²

²¹ A speaker opened a prayer with both “Creating Mother” and “Loving Father.”

²² In American society, men are not socialized from birth to believe that their greatest achievement in life will be becoming a father. Babies assigned female at birth, however, are socialized to believe that their futures are inseparable from child-bearing, and any woman who rejects this future or cannot achieve it

The biological essentialism would be more important to discuss in-depth if the feminine familial term was being used more. However, there is a much larger issue with the fact that when familial terms *are* being used to describe God, they overwhelmingly infer masculine conceptions onto God, rather than using gender-neutral words like “Parent,” “Guardian,” or “Caretaker.” While these gender neutral names would not stop sexism or masculine conceptions of God, it could perhaps be seen as a step in that direction. Another idea would be using the more gender inclusive titles that emphasize both mother and father, rather than just one.

There was only one explicitly feminine name used for God that was not “balanced out” by a male name after or around it, and that was Sophia, used once in an LGBTQPIA+ service. In Christianity, Sophia is a feminine concept of God, recalling God’s wisdom, but also used as a name for God. She is not a separate goddess in Christianity, as she is in many other new age or goddess spirituality groups. Rather, she is an aspect of who God is (specifically, God’s wisdom).

Aside from “Mother” and “Sophia,” both of which were used once, there were no other explicitly feminine names used for God in worship services.²³ There were two feminine names used once each, compared to 180 uses of masculine names for God – Lord, Father, Grandfather, and King (used 155 times, 18 times, 2 times, and 5 times, respectively).

is viscosly shamed by society. Motherhood is framed as a goal for all women, while (unplanned) fatherhood can be framed as something negative for those who are not already fathers. Thus, seeing God as a Father does not have the same connotations as seeing God as a Mother, since being a father in society is a choice, whereas motherhood is inevitable. See: Diduck, 1993; Gohel, Diamond, and Chambers 1997; Ulrich and Weatherall 2000; and Tichenor, McQuillan, Greil, Contreras, Sherffler, and Karina 2011.

²³ And, as noted before, “Mother” was used in a gender inclusive way alongside “Father.”

Due to the explained difficulties with the word “God,” there are multiple ways to look at this information. The first is that one could bracket all uses of the word “God,” and only account for the 279 mentions of titles that were not “God,” and see that masculine names were used to reference God about 65% of the time, while feminine titles were used less than one percent of the time. However, this is less than a third of the original sample size (884 to 279).

Second, one could code all uses of the word God as masculine, which would show that male terms for God were used 89% of the time. However, this would not be accurate to say, because (as discussed earlier) not all people see the word “God” as masculine, many view it as gender neutral or beyond gender.

So, third, one could code all instances of the word “God” as gender neutral. This means that masculine terms for God (Lord, Father, Grandfather, King) were used about 20% of the time, feminine names (Mother, Sophia) were used .2% of the time, and gender neutral titles were used about 80% of the time. The problem with this method is that it ignores the 43 times in worship services at Theological Seminary that the pronoun “he” was used in reference to God (and because it ignores the scholars who argue it is masculine).

At this point, it should be recognized that out of the 884 mentions of God, 68% of the time –it was just with the word “God.” So, most of the time during worship services, this is the word that was used. Sometimes it was meant as masculine, which we can see from the use of the pronoun “he,” but I am sure it was also meant to be gender neutral or beyond gender at other times.

No matter how this word is coded, explicit masculine names were given to God far more often than feminine. Just by looking at the numbers alone (2 feminine, 180 masculine) that is clear. Even if gender neutral titles are used the most,²⁴ it is still problematic that feminine names for God are only being used less than 1% of the time that God is named (really, only about .2% of the time). The large discrepancy between male and female names for God is showing that, while this environment might be using gender neutral titles for God (if “God” is coded as gender neutral), it is not using gender inclusive titles for God, and it is not giving equal emphasis to genders that are not masculine.

The most used (combined) gender neutral title for God was Holy/Sacred One/God, which was used a total of twelve times. Arguably, this is one of the most gender-neutral titles for God, as it has no masculine or feminine connotations.²⁵ Others that fall under this category of gender-neutral would be Creator (of Heaven and Earth), used eight times; Gracious God, also used eight times; and Divine (Spirit/Maker), used six times.

Titles with some slight gendered connotations were also used. Almighty God/Mighty One was used nine times. This is somewhat gendered because men are seen as the stronger sex –strength is associated with masculinity in American society –making ‘mighty’ have a masculine connotation to it (Wood, 2009, 24). Another name with masculine connotations is Yahweh, used nine times in one single service organized by the LGBTQPIA+ organization in the seminary. Yahweh is the transcribed vocalization of the Tetragrammaton (YHWH) used as God’s name throughout the Jewish Scriptures. When

²⁴ This would mean coding “God” as gender neutral.

²⁵ This is assuming that the word “God” has no masculine connotations.

parsed, the word is masculine,²⁶ which makes sense because God is a male figure throughout much of the Hebrew Bible. For these reasons, Yahweh has masculine connotations.²⁷

Another somewhat gendered title was Loving/Compassionate/Caring God, used seven times. Care is often seen as a feminine quality in contemporary American society (Wood, 2009, 24). It is extremely interesting that these titles were only used seven times, because love is a quality of God that was mentioned more than any other attribute of God in the interviews, often without any hesitation. This will be discussed further in the next chapter.

All other gender-neutral names for God were used five times or less for God: Creative God,²⁸ Living/Eternal/Immortal God/Spirit/One, God the Maker (or Maker (of all people)), God of Life, The Potter, El Shaddai, God of fun (and sport), Leading and Guiding God, (Rock and) Redeemer, Glorious God, Most High, Wonderful God, God of Peace and Love, Merciful God, God of Salvation, God of Jacob, Ruler of Glory, and God of Spirit and Light. In total, these other names were used 43 times.

INTERVIEWS

Some interview participants use male God language, mostly “he” pronouns, when discussing God. For the sake of staying true to the interview participants, these instances have not been edited out when quotes are used.

²⁶ For more information, see Long, 2013.

²⁷ While there are also other non-human terms used for God in the Bible, such as a mother hen, these terms were not used in worship services.

²⁸ Creation and creativity were small themes for both God’s attributes and also names for God. Titles with a theme of creation (Creative God, God of Creation, Creator, and/or Maker) were used a total of fourteen times.

Remembering Worship

In interviews, we spent time discussing how the participant heard or saw God being referred to in worship services at the school, and then about how they named God both privately and publicly. Many of the interview participants viewed the worship services as enforcing the inclusive language policy of the school. Most people spoke of this view by saying that they “rarely hear masculine things,”²⁹ or that God is “presented as gender-neutral” and “ignoring the pronouns.”³⁰ Laci Bell and Kimberly Marshall both spoke about Mother God/Father God or Mother-Father God language (i.e. gender inclusive language) being invoked in services.³¹ Edward Myles said that Theological Seminary’s naming of God was “very much not the male.”³² Others said that God was “openly, inclusively, and dynamically” addressed in worship services.³³ Both Lina Santos and Julia Summers spoke about the “intentionality”³⁴ within the services to not use male names and titles for God.³⁵

Other people who had this view spoke of how the inclusive language used in the services was cautious (rather than intentional) and makes God distant and not personal. Kerry Matthews said “it’s always so neutral -you know, genderized, neutral, inclusive, careful, careful, careful, careful...” and continued later, “I’m wondering if so much

²⁹ Lina Santos, December 12, 2013.

³⁰ Laci Bell, November 18, 2013.

³¹ Laci Bell, November 18, 2013; Kimberly Marshall, December 12, 2013.

³² December 12, 2013.

³³ Tammy Kemp, December 12, 2013.

³⁴ Lina Santos, December 12, 2013; Julia Summers, December 3, 2013.

³⁵ It should also be mentioned, however, that many of these people also recognized that in ‘special’ services, run and organized by different groups on campus, sexist language was more likely to be used in reference to God. This will be discussed further in chapter five.

inclusivity can get to be distracting... Like I don't know -God, he, she, they, it, we, us, ooh, I don't -you know, I don't know how to think of God..."³⁶

Two other women spoke about similar themes. Eloise Taplin said "Father God is out of the question" when asked about what names she heard being used for God in the services. She went even further and said, "I don't recall if I even heard Father..." She conceded that they just say "God" most of the time, but said that this title was not personal.³⁷ Another participant, Alisha Galles, who is Baptist, said that services in the school used "corporate-like" language that was "very inclusive." When asked to define "corporately,"³⁸ she explained:

[God] has to fit for everyone, and I think we forget that God fits you personally, right -he's not to fit everyone all at the same time, not that he doesn't fit everyone, but corporately means he has to fit everyone in that particular space at the same time and in the same way.³⁹

She explained that this "corporate" God language made God distant and not intimate, because it limited people's abilities to address God in public according to their personal relationship with God. So, when she leads prayer, she cannot engage with God as she normally does, because it is not inclusive. Eloise Taplin, who is United Methodist, spoke similarly when she said, "now when I'm asked to pray I get all choked up because I think, like, 'I can't say father'..."⁴⁰

There are two different ways of framing the idea that inclusive theological language is being used in worship services. On the one hand, many commented that inclusive God language is being used in chapel services, and they are saying that is

³⁶ Kerry Matthews, November 11, 2013.

³⁷ Eloise Taplin, January 29, 2014.

³⁸ She used both "Corporate-like" and "Corporately" in her interview.

³⁹ Alisha Galles, January 29, 2014.

⁴⁰ January 29, 2014.

intentional and deliberate in order to be more inclusive. At the same time, others say that inclusive God language is being used in services, and that it makes God distant and not personal. This is only one of many struggles that we will see with inclusive God language: the idea that it makes God impersonal and distant.⁴¹

Other people, discussed below, remembered that the inclusive language policy was not being enforced in the services, and many of these people also struggled with how exactly it could or should be enforced in services. This was another common struggle when discussing inclusive God language: how to correctly and adequately enforce it without alienating or embarrassing people. This struggle was mentioned by people who did see the inclusive language policy as being enforced and by those who did not see it as implemented.⁴²

Brenda Winfield, in her first mention of the inclusive language policy, put it in quotation marks with her fingers when she said it. When I asked her why, she explained that it is not enforced. She said that it used to be, and that the community had been very intentional about it when she first started school four years ago, but now “we always get stuck in ‘the Father’ and the ‘he.’”⁴³

Other people, however, did not feel the same way. As mentioned before, Eloise Taplin could not recall if the title “Father” was ever used in reference to God during the services, with the exception of Jesus’ prayer used during communion. Instead, she said, “What’s the word, they see him as a female or something...” When I asked if the title was Sophia, she responded, “that was thrown out there many times.”⁴⁴ Lina Santos also

⁴¹ This is discussed more in chapter five.

⁴² This is also discussed more in chapter five.

⁴³ December 2, 2013.

⁴⁴ January 29, 2014.

remembered Sophia being used in services, and she said that she liked it and had heard it a couple of times.⁴⁵ Alisha Galles also referenced Sophia in her interview when talking about personal relationships with God by saying this:

I don't care what you call him. Right, you can say 'She-God', or you can say 'she', with Sophia, whoever. But I appreciate you doing that more than God corporately.⁴⁶

Even though Sophia was only used one time during worship services between August and December of 2013, it is possible that my participants were recalling other semesters as well as that one. Interestingly, though, people remembered Sophia being used in worship services, even when they did not recall masculine names for God, as Eloise Taplin did not. Most likely, this is due to the tradition of a male God. When God is envisioned as anything not male or masculine, it sticks out more in memory as being prevalent just because it is different. When God is imagined as male, though, it is not noticed, because it is so "normal."

In their book, *Divided by Faith*, Michael Emerson and Christian Smith discuss memory and group relationships in one chapter. They explain that people positively remember ingroup behaviors and downplay negative ingroup behaviors, while also remembering negative outgroup behavior more than the positive outgroup behavior (156-157). This leads to stereotypes of the outgroup, the other, and only information that confirms the stereotype is recalled, "while contradictory evidence is dismissed as an exception and typically forgotten altogether" (157). The ideas about who is the ingroup and/or outgroup may vary among the students at Theological Seminary.

⁴⁵ December 12, 2013.

⁴⁶ January 29, 2014.

In the opposite way, we can see that the people at Theological Seminary have already defined themselves –their ingroup –in a way that does not allow for memory of masculine names. Their definition of themselves, as recalled by many participants, is that Theological Seminary is an inclusive institution, dedicated to gender neutral theological language. Any contradictory evidence (masculine names for God) is forgotten, and they only remember what confirms their pre-made definition.⁴⁷ They may “overremember” terms like Sophia either because they want to believe feminine imagery was used, or because, for some, it is a marker of the “outgroup,” in this case feminists, who are challenging traditional God images.

Other names and attributes of God were also remembered by the interview participants. Kimberly Marshall and Lina Santos both thought of the creator/creation side of God being emphasized through worship services.⁴⁸ The names “Yahweh” and “Elohim” were mentioned by Josiah Harris, a first year (first semester) student, who said that the former was “prevalent” while the latter “may have been referenced in one of the services.”⁴⁹ The title “Elohim” was not used at all, but “Yahweh” had been verbally used nine times as the first section elaborated. Since Josiah had only been present at the seminary for one semester, his answers could show that he was remembering services that were not at Theological Seminary (perhaps, for instance, his home church consistently uses “Elohim”) or that he could not really remember common names but felt compelled to answer my question. Regardless, it is quite interesting to see how people recall God being named in worship services.

⁴⁷ This does not always happen, but perhaps this could help explain why so many of my participants did not recall masculine God language in worship services.

⁴⁸ Kimberly Marshall, December 12, 2013; Lina Santos, December 12, 2013.

⁴⁹ December 5, 2013.

Personal Names for God

I asked people how they personally named and addressed God, both privately and publicly. Most people answered that they just addressed God as “God” rather than other titles. At least eight out of fifteen people mentioned just naming God as “God,” and sometimes adding in some descriptive adjectives if they were leading a public prayer (like faithful, joyful, gracious, etc).⁵⁰

The word “God” was seen as being neutral by my participants. Eloise Taplin, who said she usually refers to God as “Father God” told me, “when I’m conscious of inclusive-ness, I would just say God.”⁵¹ This would lean more to the idea that the word “God” is gender neutral, but also indicates that, for her, the term God is still a referent to a masculine God. Other people like Josiah Harris or Lina Santos, told me that they do not see God in anthropomorphic terms.⁵² This would point more to an idea that the term “God” is a step away from gendered language entirely. No one in my sample said that the word “God” could be masculine.

Both Kerry Matthews and Isabelle Grey mentioned how the term “Father God” makes them cringe. Kerry Matthews, however, said that her idea of God as “him” was changing since she came to Theological Seminary, while Isabelle Grey implied that this reaction started before seminary.⁵³ Julia Summers talked about how she asked her father to stop praying “Heavenly Father” before dinner, and how she tries to point out to classmates when they use sexist God language.⁵⁴ Edward Myles talked about how he

⁵⁰ Kerry Matthews, November 11, 2013; Gabriel Porter, November 14, 2013; Brenda Winfield, December 2, 2013; Isabelle Grey, December 4, 2013; Josiah Harris, December 5, 2013; Tammy Kemp, December 12, 2013; Lina Santos, December 12, 2013; Kimberly Marshall, December 12, 2013.

⁵¹ January 29, 2014.

⁵² Josiah Harris, December 5, 2013; Lina Santos, December 12, 2013.

⁵³ Kerry Matthews, November 11, 2013; Isabelle Grey, December 4, 2013.

⁵⁴ December 3, 2013.

always grew up with God as Father, but now believes that “particularly when talking about God, I feel that it just has to be gender neutral... it feels right to me.”⁵⁵ For him, this journey began before Theological Seminary, as he had gone to a church focused on gender inclusive theological language before entering.

All of this shows that many people within my sample have been attempting to change their language, or have others around them change their language, to be more inclusive. Even if this did not start at Theological Seminary, the inclusive language policy would be supportive of this enterprise. Other people, like Kerry Matthews, have begun wondering about gendered God language because of the inclusive language policy at the seminary, which demonstrates it is having an influence.

Other participants, however, did not change their language in the same way. Some people still used very unapologetic male language for God in the interviews. Where others might accidentally say “he” in reference to God, and then catch themselves and talk about it, other people frequently used that pronoun, often associated with males, for God and also did not have any issues with using male names for God. Eloise Taplin talked about how she had to change her theological language when she came to Theological Seminary, because all of the “Father God” language in her papers would be crossed out. She said:

When I came here, and you have to be inclusive... I had a hard time with that... I still find myself, even though I changed that part to write papers, but even... I still address as Father God... and when I'm conscious of inclusive-ness, I would just say God. Most of the time, I still stick with Father God.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ December 12, 2013.

⁵⁶ January 29, 2013.

Another participant, Alisha Galles, stated that “you have to learn to be politically correct,” before discussing how she tried not to give God pronouns because “sometimes pronouns don’t always work, and people get offended,” but not because it was required of her to be gender neutral in reference to God. One Episcopal student, however, did not seem to want to change his language at all when he said:

I’ve seen the “PC wars” -the “political correctness wars” and it’s an unhappy aspect of academic life, so that was partly my reaction [to the inclusive language policy]. I’m perfectly happy to swap out mankind for humankind... but when our liturgy -our Episcopal liturgy keeps referring to the trinity as, you know, you know, God the Father, God the Son, God the... I’m not about to eliminate all references to God -God the Father. I’ll take my lumps.

So there was a small group of my participants who either refused to change their theological language or only changed it to get by in the seminary. Two of these people mentioned that gender-neutral God language is “politically correct,” which is simply a misunderstanding of the reasons for gender neutral God language, as outlined in the policy itself. Interestingly, two of the people upholding male God language were women. This demonstrates the difficulty in changing traditional ideas –especially if a person finds comfort in viewing God as a Father.

Other people, while they did not ascribe to male or masculine titles for God, still admitted viewing God as a male, even if that view was changing. Kerry Matthews said “I do see him as a ‘him,’ but that is kinda changing being here... Trying to look at it more of a caretaker than a ‘him.’”⁵⁷ This change still employs somewhat stereotypical ideas of what someone acts like based on their gender (it relies on the assumption that men are not caretakers, for instance), but it is potentially a move towards inclusive theological language.

⁵⁷ November 11, 2013.

Julia Summers said “I’m not saying that I think of God as a woman, because I don’t, but I’m trying really hard not to think of God as a man.”⁵⁸ Similarly, Lina Santos expressed difficulty in seeing God as a woman,⁵⁹ but she attributed that to her tradition and instead aimed for more gender neutral God language even though she still sometimes defaults to “Lord” and “Father” due to habit. She also talked about how she found healing in envisioning a healthy relationship with a male (God), but she understood how a male God could potentially distance others.⁶⁰

Isabelle Grey mentioned that she adamantly does not call God Father “EVER” but that she also does not call God Mother because “that’s as uncomfortable for some people as Father God is for me, and so I try to go with more gender-neutral terms, or just, you know, adjectives.” She did, however, talk about using the phrase “God like a baker woman” or “baker woman God” in services outside of the seminary before, and received a positive response from the congregation.⁶¹ Another seminarian at the oral presentation of this thesis told of the opposite strong negative reaction to switching to God instead of “he” in the liturgical language of an Episcopal church.

Only one person in the interviews viewed God as Mother rather than Father, and that was Laci Bell. She first described God as “The Divine Mystery that can be seen and unseen,” and eventually said that seeing God as a Mother helped her to heal, “seeing that I have some pretty big wounds from the “Father God” image and all the sexism in the institution.” She did say that her names for God (in public) depended on the context, but

⁵⁸ December 3, 2013.

⁵⁹ She had also said earlier in her interview that she does not see God as a person.

⁶⁰ December 12, 2013.

⁶¹ December 2, 2013.

those names were all gender neutral (Holy One, Creator) or gender inclusive (Mother-Father God, both God and Goddess).⁶²

Lina Santos also mentioned using the title “Creator” and emphasizing God as always creating and creative, rather than relying on familial terms.⁶³ Many other people also invoked “Creator” as a name/title they use for God in prayers.⁶⁴ This was also emphasized throughout the chapel services –God’s creative personality and creativity. Lydia Rowe explained why she focused more on what God does when describing God rather than trying to name God:

We are such a gendered language -English, in particular, but most Western languages are very gendered languages, and so we get then tied up and twisted up in this thing of... God the Mother, God the Father, God the He, the She the... you know? And it is just so objectifying that that almost doesn’t work for me at all, or at least the way I understand that pronoun. So often I’ll try to use words... that speak more about what God does or what God creates.⁶⁵

Other people also mentioned using adjectives to describe God, rather than trying to name God in the way that “Father” or “Lord” names God. Gabriel Porter mentioned using adjectives based around what the group was praying for –if they were praying for forgiveness, then he would use the word merciful; praying for healing, use the word compassion; etc.⁶⁶ Lina Santos specifically mentioned “Loving One” and “Friendly One” as adjectival names she would use for God in prayer.⁶⁷ This type of naming brings out one characteristic of God to focus on, rather than all of the different characteristics that a “Father” could have, for instance, but also opens up space for God to be both, and/or

⁶² November 18, 2013.

⁶³ December 12, 2013.

⁶⁴ Kerry Matthews, November 11, 2013; Laci Bell, November 18, 2013; Brenda Winfield, December 2, 2013; Isabelle Grey, December 4, 2013; Kimberly Marshal, December 12, 2013.

⁶⁵ December 9, 2013.

⁶⁶ November 14, 2013.

⁶⁷ December 12, 2013.

male and female. These specific characteristics will be discussed further in the next chapter.

DISCUSSION

There is some discrepancy between feminist scholars and lay people over whether or not the word “God” is masculine or gender neutral.⁶⁸ For some scholars, it is masculine, but for my interview participants it was gender neutral or a step away from gendered language altogether. With a larger sample, perhaps people would have had more to say about this word and its connotations. As it is, the word “God” means different things to different people and it is not possible to definitively decide one way or another.

One theme that has emerged from both the worship services and the interview participants is that names for God are rarely ever explicitly feminine. Some are masculine, and some are gender neutral, and some can function as both, but God is rarely ever given feminine titles.

Inclusivity cannot happen if one gender is being discarded at the expense of others because people are uncomfortable. This is not to say that all male theological language should be discarded, but rather that more female theological language should be used in conjunction with it, or perhaps on its own. Even further, other gender identities could also be illuminated through theological language by emphasizing that if all people were created in God’s image, they are all reflections of God, regardless of whether or not they define themselves as one specific gender, multiple genders, or no gender whatsoever. This, more than just “Mother-Father God”, would reveal God to be truly gender inclusive.

⁶⁸ This is not to say that all feminist scholars agree that God is masculine, because that is not true.

CHAPTER FOUR

“If we’re gonna believe in God, I think that love has to be kind of the primary thing that God is, otherwise what’s the point?... you know, we need to believe in something that’s different from what we see in the world” Kimberly Marshall, December 12, 2013.

One of the quite interesting aspects of my interviews was the similarities in responses when describing the stereotypical idea of God. Seven different interview participants mentioned the stereotype of God as an old white man with a grey beard up in the clouds.¹ Some people said this jokingly while others said that was their first idea of God (due to pictures and illustrations), but that it changed over time.²

At first, I just found this occurrence humorous. But I realized that this shows how deep people’s memories go. These cultural ideas of God are held on to, even if they are changed over time, and they are often people’s first interaction with the idea of God. And I wonder if this informs people’s God Concepts –what they are taught about God –or their God Image –what they feel about God –or a mix of both.

This chapter discusses the characteristics and attributes given to God in both chapel services and in individual interviews. Mostly, what is discussed here would fall into the category of God Concepts, as this is what people talk about when they are asked to talk about God (Hoffman, 2004, 4). Many people discuss feelings and emotions and experiences when discussing God, which would generally fall into the idea of the God

¹ Julia Summers, December 3, 2013; Jonathan Key, December 4, 2013; Isabelle Grey, December 4, 2013; Lydia Rowe, December 9, 2013; Lina Santos, December 12, 2013; Kimberly Marshall, December 12, 2013; and Edward Myles, December 12, 2013.

² Julia Summers joked that it changed when she watched Bruce Almighty and then changed again when she watched Dogma due to those movies challenges to the stereotypical characterization of God.

Image. There is overlap here, however, as both the God Concept (what is taught about God) and the God Image (how people feel about God) develop together (Hoffman, 2005, 133).

For the chapel services, a service was coded as mentioning a character trait for God if it was mentioned once in the service, though it could have been mentioned multiple times in the services. In the interviews, two specific questions dealt with God's characteristics, though the participants were free to talk about God and God's attributes at any time. Describing God can be done in multiple ways, either by using individual characteristics (loving, creative, etc) or by naming God through roles (creator, provider, etc). Characteristics can be understood as qualities that a person or thing possesses, while roles can be understood more as a name or title, which invokes numerous characteristics. This chapter is focusing specifically on individual characteristics, with the exception of the interviews. During the interviews, I asked participants to name three main characteristics of God, and while most of them provided individual characteristics, some roles were used to answer this question, and they will be discussed at the end of the chapter.

WORSHIP SERVICES

Overwhelmingly, God's love and care and compassion were emphasized throughout the chapel services. Twenty two out of thirty seven services spoke at least once about God's love or concern for people. This was the most-emphasized characteristic of God throughout the services. As shown in the previous chapter, titles and names for God focusing on God's love (Loving/Compassionate/Caring God) were only

used seven times in the services. This means that characteristics of God are not always reflected in names for God.

The second most-mentioned characteristic was God's glory or holiness. These traits were called upon at least once in seventeen different services. These traits tend to have connotations of transcendence, power, awesomeness, and general un-human-ness. This is interesting, because "loving" is a very personal quality, while "holiness" seems to be very impersonal, or at the very least it is not relational, and yet they are the two most mentioned attributes of God's character in worship services.

God's might was mentioned in thirteen services, God's power in five services, and God's strength in three. All of these character traits have masculine connotations in this culture, which was discussed in the previous chapter (Wood, 2009, 24). Often, these traits were used together in the same service. God's power and might were mentioned together in two services, while God's strength and might were mentioned together in three services.

Two character traits were both mentioned in a total of twelve services: God's creativity and God's justice-oriented nature. God's creativity has been a theme in how people name God (using words like "Creator," for example)³ throughout the last chapter, and will continue to be a theme in this chapter as well. God being just and interested in justice for people has not really been a theme in how respondents name God, even though it was emphasized in just as many services as God's creative nature.

³ For a reminder, names and titles that picked up on creative themes were used a total of fourteen times. There were no names invoking God's justice, like Judge or Liberator.

Perhaps this is an issue of naming. “Creator” is an easy name that picks up on God’s creativity. There is not a similar name that picks up on God’s interest in justice.⁴ The two characteristics were mentioned similar amounts of times in interviews (justice being mentioned by two people, creativity three), so neither characteristic represent a dominant trend.

God’s peace and grace were mentioned in ten different services each, while God’s mercy was mentioned in nine different services. Pulling from the last chapter, names and titles mentioning God’s mercy and peace were each used less than five times in services, while God’s grace was called on eight times, mostly using “Gracious God.” In the next section, we will see that God’s peace and mercy were mentioned in interviews, but not so much God’s grace. The characteristic of grace is spoken of in chapel services as an attribute of God, and God is named gracious, but the character trait is not emphasized in personal interviews.

This is interesting because of the definitions and understandings of grace and mercy. Grace, in Christian theology, is a gift from God because it allows people salvation even though they do not deserve it because of their sin. Mercy, on the other hand, can be defined as compassion or forgiveness towards someone even when one has the power to punish them. Mercy is a part of grace. These characteristics of God can be seen when humanity’s fallen nature is emphasized, which happened frequently in services. Because of people’s sin, God’s grace and mercy are needed.

In almost every service with communion, which occurred once a week, people’s collective faults were mentioned in group prayers with phrases like:

⁴ This could be because names like “Judge” can be associated with this, and it is difficult to see God as both loving and judging (especially since judging has connotations of wrath).

God took good care of us. In times of plenty, God gave us the best. In times of trouble, God gave us what we needed. But we only cared about ourselves. We hoarded and saved. We valued social standing and wealth over holiness and justice.⁵

Emphasizing people's faults in this way repetitively could be one reason why God's mercy is emphasized. Interestingly, this could be a gendered dynamic. In the second chapter, it was shown that chapel is mostly attended by women, on average, and mostly led by women as well. This specific liturgy was written by the female chaplain, who does most of the planning of the services. According to Hoffman (2004), women tend to emphasize God's grace, because of their fallen state (20). According to Christian doctrine, all people have a fallen state, but for women this can be particularly poignant as they see themselves as separate from God in a way that men are not (19, 21). Taking from this, the emphasis on God's grace and people's sin/fallen nature could actually be a gender dynamic that is happening due to the leadership of women in the services.⁶

God being present (as in, God being with people) was mentioned in eight different services. This is also thematic in the interviews. Also mentioned in eight different services was God's interest in diversity, which was not mentioned in the interviews, though the diversity present within the school was. This was brought up in collective prayers beginning with "Beyond the generosity of God's indiscriminate care for people of all races, cultures and faiths"⁷ or with a call to worship ending with:

We gather together to explicitly give thanks for God's grace, *which pours down upon all of God's people* regardless of sexual orientation, gender

⁵ September 26, 2013.

⁶ However, it could also simply be in line with Christian doctrine. It could also be a denominational aspect of the liturgy. It could also be due to the school's emphasis on justice, and people's participation in injustice.

⁷ November 20, 2013.

identity or expression, race, ethnicity, age, class, sex or physical and mental ability.⁸

These refrains echo the school's emphasis on diversity as a good thing.

God being infinite or eternal was mentioned in a total of seven different services, which is similar to the names and titles evoking those qualities. All other attributes for God were mentioned five times or less. Other attributes for God included: having forgiveness (2); having strength (3); bringing joy (5); leading/guiding people (4); having an unchanging nature (3); being faithful (5); being good (4); being truthful (5); being wise/having wisdom (3); being indescribable (1).

INTERVIEWS

I had two specific questions in the interviews dealing with descriptions of God. I asked participants to describe God to the best of their ability. Then, I asked them to name three main characteristics or qualities of who God is. God was described in a number of different ways by the interview participants, sometimes using individual characteristics and other times invoking roles, which compound individual characteristics into a singular idea.

It should be noted that many people struggled with describing God. Many people said God was indescribable, which will be discussed later. Laci Bell could not actually list out three main characteristics, finally telling me that God was the "life-force in the universe." After naming her three character traits for God, Julia Summers said, "When I think about my picture of God, that's where it starts: God is." Similarly, before naming any characteristics he had for God and while he was still thinking, Jonathan Key stated,

⁸ The italics were present in the bulletin. The emphasis is not my own, it was present in the service itself. This liturgy was written by students at the LGBTQPIA+ service. November 21, 2013.

“God is... God is... yes, he is yes.”⁹ These examples do show, that for some respondents, using anthropocentric words for God was difficult (see more below), reinforcing, that for some, the term God is not just a masculine substitute, although for Jonathan and others, it was, although his description was not anthropomorphic.

Love

Twelve participants named love or compassion as one of the three primary characteristics of God.¹⁰ Isabelle Grey mentioned “Comforter”¹¹ when asked to describe God, which could also fall into the category of “love” and “compassion.”¹² She also mentioned qualities of love and care after she had listed her three main characteristics. Including Isabelle, a total of thirteen interview participants said that love was a main characteristic of God. The exact phrase “God is love” was used by four of my interview participants.¹³

Kerry Matthews said that love was a “major” characteristic of God for her, and “all of my attributes for God [have] to do with care.”¹⁴ Edward Myles echoed this sentiment when he said that saying “love” when asked about God’s characteristics was a “knee-jerk reaction.”¹⁵ It was immediate, with no hesitation.

⁹ December 4, 2013.

¹⁰ Kerry Matthews, November 11, 2013; Gabriel Porter, November 14, 2013; Brenda Winfield, December 2, 2013; Julia Summers, December 3, 2013; Jonathan Key, December 4, 2013; Lydia Rowe, December 9, 2013; Tammy Kemp, December 12, 2013; Lina Santos, December 12, 2013; Kimberly Marshall, December 12, 2013; Edward Myles, December 12, 2013; Eloise Taplin, January 29, 2014; and Alisha Galles, January 29, 2014.

¹¹ This is a role for God, which has connotations of many different attributes for God.

¹² December 4, 2013.

¹³ Kerry Matthews, November 11, 2013; Julia Summers, December 3, 2013; Tammy Kemp, December 12, 2013; Lina Santos, December 12, 2013.

¹⁴ November 11, 2013.

¹⁵ December 12, 2013.

Gabriel Porter mentioned God being “compassionate,” meaning “really deep care,” and said “that’s sometimes what we get right about God.”¹⁶ Alisha Galles also mentioned something similar, saying that love had to be first when talking about God, because “we get it twisted about what God likes and who God likes.” She further elaborated that God’s love is unconditional “no matter what you call him, or her, or whatever you address him.”¹⁷

Lydia Rowe said that God was “fiercely loving” in a powerful and active way, rather than a passive love. She also mentioned that we try to pacify God’s love for us in order to not lose control. Instead, we need to see God’s love as an active force, not as something passive.¹⁸

This characteristic of God was present throughout interviews with all Methodists I interviewed, one Lutheran, one Episcopal, one Quaker, and one Baptist. It was present in interviews with people of all ages, and all years in their programs. It was present in three out of my four interviews with men, and nine of eleven interviews with women. White people and people of color mentioned it. The idea of God as loving, or of God as love, does not seem to be constrained to only one denomination or age group or gender, at least within my sample.

Obviously, in both the worship services and the individual participants, love is a primary facet of God. Even so, only in worship services was God’s love connected to diversity, as shown in the earlier quote from a service about God having “indiscriminate care” for everyone, no matter what. Some individuals used the word “accepting” to describe God, which could hint at diversity, but no interview participant said that God is

¹⁶ November 14, 2013.

¹⁷ January 29, 2014.

¹⁸ December 9, 2013.

interested and invested in diversity the way the worship services did. This is interesting since many people spoke about diversity in their interviews, as discussed in the second chapter.

Other Characteristics

The idea of God being “active” and/or “present” in people’s lives was mentioned or referenced in about five different interviews.¹⁹ Laci Bell described God as “Here, moving, flowing, working, loving people and creation and communities.”²⁰ Brenda Winfield mentioned God as an “Ever-present, ever-loving Being that surrounds and is within us.”²¹

Other people focused more on the presence and activity of *communication* between God and people. Josiah Harris stated that one of the three main characteristics of God is that God “can communicate.”²² Tammy Kemp invoked the idea that God is everywhere, and mentioned that a person does not have to be in a church in order to pray and be heard by God.²³ Similarly, Eloise Taplin explained, “For me, God is real and God -I talk to him and I often feel him -the presence, his presence.” She later included “answers prayer” as one of her three main characteristics of God.²⁴

Creativity was mentioned in three different interviews as a main characteristic of God. Jonathan Key named “Creator” as one of God’s three main attributes.²⁵ Lydia Rowe said that God is “enormously creative and imaginative” and that we need to be open to that creativity. She repeated later that “God is a God of great creativity and great

¹⁹ (not mentioned below) Kerry Matthews, November 11, 2013; Lydia Rowe, December 9, 2013; Tammy Kemp, December 12, 2013.

²⁰ November 18, 2013.

²¹ December 2, 2013.

²² December 5, 2013.

²³ December 12, 2013.

²⁴ January 29, 2014.

²⁵ December 4, 2013.

abundance.”²⁶ Lina Santos commented that her favorite image of God was that of God as creative. She specified that it was not just an image of a creator, but that continual act of creating that she liked most.²⁷

Three people mentioned God being unpredictable. When asked to describe God, Gabriel Porter said:

Words like... wild, you know... unpredictable... they don't quite get it because, even though -it's interesting, it seems kinda paradoxical, metaphorical cause God always seemed kinda ordered... for some people but I think, I think that's not wrong either...²⁸

Kerry Matthews said something similar in her interview when asked to describe God. She said that God is caring and open and has “nothing to do with rules and requirements.”²⁹ Edward Myles compared God to a tornado or whirlwind, ultimately trying to explain how God is energy and chaos and, ultimately, indescribable.³⁰

Other people also talked about how God is indescribable, specifically when I asked them to attempt and describe God to the best of their ability.³¹ Isabelle Grey said “God is beyond all definition” and explained how it was both cocky of people but also natural for people to think we can describe or understand God.³² Lydia Rowe echoed these thoughts when she said “I think that, in many ways, God is indescribable” and later talked about how “our words limit God.”³³ When I asked Josiah Harris to describe God to the best of his ability, he said “I could, but... to my mind, it's the unanswerable” and then

²⁶ December 9, 2013.

²⁷ December 12, 2013.

²⁸ November 14, 2013.

²⁹ November 11, 2013.

³⁰ December 12, 2013.

³¹ This happened even after I added “understanding that language is finite and God is incomprehensible” directly after I asked the question.

³² December 4, 2013.

³³ December 9, 2013.

told me “I do not think of the Deity in anthropomorphic terms.”³⁴ Lina Santos also explained that “God is not a person.”³⁵ Similarly, Kimberly Marshall said:

If we’re going to say there’s a God, then... I don’t think we can... I don’t think we can anthropomorphize God. I mean, I think we do, and I think that’s okay, cause we need to find some way to kind of identify, but I think it’s extremely dangerous to make God a certain race or a certain gender or a certain religion.³⁶

Alisha Galles said that God is “so much more than the box we put him in” and explained that, in the Bible, Israel called God many names because they needed God to be many things for them.³⁷ She continued:

But I wish I could just put into words how my heart feels, right, when I think about God... I don’t have enough words -there aren’t enough to just say how wonderful, magnificent, and so many other words -English, Spanish, German -that I could say how he is or who he is. I think... I think we limit ourselves in naming him, and I think we limit ourselves when we think that our relationship with him can’t be outside of the proverbial box. I believe God can do all kinds of things... and so, I can have any relationship I choose to have with him, and call him whatever I want to call him. Because the thing about a relationship with God is that it’s personal and intimate, and so the thing that I need is the thing that he is all the time.³⁸

Some people, when describing God, mentioned that God is more like a spirit than anything else. Isabelle Grey and Kimberly Marshall both mentioned that God is spirit,³⁹ but Lina Santos went into a bit more detail. She said that God “connects and relates to us through the spirit.”⁴⁰

³⁴ December 5, 2013.

³⁵ December 12, 2013.

³⁶ December 12, 2013.

³⁷ Biblical stories were also brought up in other interviews when participants were asked to describe God. Isabelle Grey (December 4, 2013) described God as “Challenger” and explained that one of her favorite Bible stories was when Jacob wrestled with God/an angel. She told me that wanted God to wrestle with her, especially when feeling distant from God. Gabriel Porter (November 14, 2013) summed this up by saying “stories are the best way to describe God.”

³⁸ January 29, 2014.

³⁹ Isabelle Grey, December 4, 2013; Kimberly Marshall, December 12, 2013.

⁴⁰ December 12, 2013.

This was an idea also mentioned by Tammy Kemp in her interview. She said “God, in essence, is... is love... and relationship” before continuing to explain that God was also “embracing, hopeful, renewing spiritual energy, accepting” and more.⁴¹ Similarly, Kerry Matthews named accepting as one of her three main characteristics of God –it was the first attribute she mentioned, just before loving.⁴²

Other people mentioned emotions while describing God. Jonathan Key explained that “God is empowering, he’s loving, he’s... a bringer of awesomeness and joy.”⁴³ Joy was also mentioned in five chapel services, either invoking God’s joy or God’s bringing of joy to people. Kimberly Marshall provided more nuance when she included both joy and sorrow in her three main characteristics for God. She explained that they were “two sides of the same coin” and that “if you’re a God of love, you can’t look at the world and be joyful, because there’s a lot of crappy stuff.”⁴⁴ Lydia Rowe offered even more nuance by saying “I’m happy to say that God is vulnerable, as vulnerable as the beings who are made in God’s image.” She explained how this allowed her to know that God feels with people and is present in both joyful moments and sad moments.⁴⁵

God’s justice was also mentioned in some interviews. Kimberly Marshall and Brenda Winfield both talked about God being just and interested in justice.⁴⁶ Lina Santos said “God is the values of peace and love and justice” in her interview as well, but she did not include “justice” or “just” in her three main characteristics of God the way Kimberly and Brenda did.⁴⁷

⁴¹ December 12, 2013.

⁴² November 11, 2013.

⁴³ December 4, 2013.

⁴⁴ December 12, 2013.

⁴⁵ December 9, 2013.

⁴⁶ Brenda Winfield, December 2, 2013; Kimberly Marshall, December 12, 2013.

⁴⁷ Lina Santos, December 12, 2013.

Other attributes for God were individual with little to no overlap. Brenda Winfield's third character trait for God was merciful.⁴⁸ Julia Summers said that God is "funny" and "contemplative," the latter referring to a "peaceful state of being."⁴⁹ Jonathan Key mentioned that God is "empowering," along with his other two characteristics mentioned earlier.⁵⁰ Lydia Rowe's final attribute for God was "relentlessly faithful," meaning that God is always there for us.⁵¹ Edward Myles described God as both "energy" and "passion."⁵² Tammy Kemp said God is "inspiring" and "healing."⁵³ Josiah Harris described God as "omnipotent" and "omniscient."⁵⁴ All of these are actual character traits, but some people described God using titles or roles.

Describing God can be done in multiple ways, either by using individual characteristics (loving, creative, etc) or by naming God through roles (creator, provider, etc). Characteristics can be understood as qualities that a person or thing possesses, while roles can be understood more as a name or title, which invokes numerous characteristics. Roles carry connotations of multiple characteristics.

Eloise Taplin described God as "provider."⁵⁵ Alisha Galles named God "parent" and "friend" for her second and third main characteristics, after "loving" as God's first attribute.⁵⁶ Jonathan Key named God "Creator" for one of God's three main characteristics.⁵⁷ These roles have many characteristics associated with them, and they function as a very compact way of describing God. For instance, the role of (ideal/good)

⁴⁸ December 2, 2013.

⁴⁹ December 3, 2013.

⁵⁰ December 4, 2013.

⁵¹ December 9, 2013.

⁵² December 12, 2013.

⁵³ December 12, 2013.

⁵⁴ December 5, 2013.

⁵⁵ January 29, 2014.

⁵⁶ January 29, 2014.

⁵⁷ December 4, 2013.

parent has connotations of care, responsibility, presence (as in, being near), potential punishment for wrongdoing, etc.

Isabelle Grey made all of her attributes for God into roles that God fulfills, rather than naming individual characteristics of God, which was unique to her interview. Other participants used at least one individual characteristic (like loving) to describe God, usually more. Isabelle first named God “Comforter,” then “Life-Giver,” then “Challenger.” In her explanation of these roles, she spoke of individual attributes of God (loving, compassionate, creative, etc) but her three main characteristics of God were all roles that God she sees God as fulfilling, rather than individual characteristics.

DISCUSSION

As Alisha Galles said in her interview, God is a lot of different things to a lot of different people. Primarily, though, those I interviewed saw God as love and/or God as loving. This is the most-emphasized quality of God throughout religious services at Theological Seminary and throughout the individual interviews. Another important characteristic throughout both the services and interviews is God’s activity and presence in people’s lives.

Generally speaking, character traits are gender neutral and can be held by a person of any gender. Nonetheless, there are certain attributes that have connotations of a specific gender, like how strength is often associated with masculinity. It should be noted that only the worship services mentioned God’s strength and power. Interview participants did not seem to be interested in that, instead saying that God could be vulnerable or sad.⁵⁸ This is an interesting distinction.

⁵⁸ With the exception of one participant, Josiah Harris, who described God as “omnipotent.”

As shown above, there is much overlap in the way people describe God –love being the most obvious, but it can even be seen in characteristics like God being present/active in people’s lives, or that God is creative and/or unpredictable. There does not seem to be much connection in potential reasons for the overlap. Different people are saying similar things about God –or, they are not saying anything similar, as discussed on page 75. I looked for relationships between the length of time at the school, the denomination of the participants, ages of the participants, and other demographic variables, but there is not a relationship between the variables and how people are talking about God.

This could change with a larger sample size, but at this point there is not a relationship between the demographics that I have and how the people I interviewed are describing God. Worship service attendance could play a factor in the people who did not mention the characteristic love in relation to God –Laci Bell had not been attending services at the university very much in her second year of study, and Josiah Harris had only attended two or three services in his first year of study. However, Isabelle Grey, who described God as “Comforter” (which has connotations of love and care) stopped going to chapel as often in recent years. A larger sample would be needed in order to truly assess any potential relationships between demographics and God descriptions.

There also seems to be a disconnection between how services name God and how services describe God. This is shown by services emphasizing loving characteristics of God, while names that emphasized this specific characteristic were only used seven times in thirty seven services. Perhaps this is because familial names are thought to encompass this characteristic of love, as father and mother are both roles with connotations of many

characteristics. Yet there were also many who viewed God in non-anthropocentric terms, a harder characteristic to pick up on in the services.

There is something to say about the fact that explicit male titles were used for God 180 times while female titles were only used twice, and love/loving was the most emphasized characteristic of God in the services. Elizabeth Johnson discusses the problems of attributing love, compassion, and kindness (stereotypical feminine qualities) with a male idea of God, as it furthers the subordination of women but allows men to flourish (1992, 47-49). She writes:

Adding “feminine” traits to the male-imagined God furthers the subordination of women by making the patriarchal symbol less threatening, more attractive. This approach does not, then, serve well for speech about God in a more inclusive and liberating direction (49).

It is impossible to say whether or not people have an explicit idea of a male God during the services. Some people probably do, but others do not. According to Johnson, the excess of male titles and lack of female titles, alongside the emphasis on God’s love could be problematic.

While there are plenty of resources for gender neutral and/or gender inclusive names for God, some people still rely on very patriarchal titles that reinforce sexist assumptions. Ultimately, this shows the power of the dominant cultural discourse, as well as a lack of dedication to inclusive theological language. With just a little more creativity, such inclusion could be pursued. In the next chapter, the inclusive language policy will be discussed, along with what people think about it.

CHAPTER FIVE

“And [the inclusive language policy] seems kinda high-brow, you know, maybe? Like, you know, like drinking fair-trade coffee... so there’s this kind of culture that kind of... all of it kind of tends to blend together... but the problem is people aren’t able to see the real urgency and the deep needs of -the commitments -what shapes those commitments and habits. And I think students are introduced to some of that stuff in some of the classes... but I still don’t think that they get the gravity of how important the language we use is and how it shapes the way that we interact with each other.” Gabriel Porter, November 14, 2013.

I remember very distinctly my reaction when I first heard the word “Godself.” I was in undergrad, in a religious studies class taught by the woman who would become my thesis adviser. I thought it was weird. I thought about that word a lot, and what it did theologically. My undergraduate college did not have an inclusive language policy like Theological Seminary, but I wonder what my reaction would have been to that, back when I had never heard of such a thing, since I was raised in a very traditional Baptist church.

This chapter discusses various reactions to the inclusive language policy by my interview participants. Some participants agreed that the policy was positive, or, at the very least, necessary. A subset of these people were concerned about how the policy was or could be enforced, others were fairly certain that it was not enforced the way it should be, and still others did not comment on the enforcement of the policy at all. A small group of participants saw the policy as negative for a variety of reasons, mostly due to their traditional beliefs and understandings.

These traditional beliefs can make it seem like a person's idea of God is being taken away from them when they are confronted by something like the inclusive language policy. Indeed, some people feel that this type of language makes God impersonal.

At the end of the chapter, there will be a brief discussion about the worship services at Theological Seminary and inclusive language. There were times during the services where congregants changed male theological language to be more inclusive. There were also moments in interviews where participants said that different types of services have more masculine God language, and that is reflected on as well.

INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE POLICY

When discussing God language, either their own or at worship services, the interview participants had a lot to say about the inclusive language policy of the school itself. All students and faculty are meant to adhere to this policy when referring to God or people. Instead of "mankind," "humankind" should be used. When discussing God, gender neutral or gender inclusive titles should be used, like "Creator" or "Mother-Father God." The policy discusses how masculine God language limits women's abilities to understand themselves as made in God's image, limits people's understandings of who God is, and also perpetuates sexist attitudes in society that women are inherently inferior to men.

Generally, participants agreed that the policy itself was necessary, or, at the very least, good. Some of these people were concerned about how the policy was or could be enforced, due to issues of culture and people's personal identities. Other people said the policy was not being enforced like it should be, but did not quite know how to fix that.

Policy as Positive

When we began talking about the inclusive language policy of the school, Edward Myles spoke positively about it. He explained that it is “strongly shared” at orientation, and that it is a way of allowing God to be seen and spoken about from a number of different points of view.¹ Brenda Winfield also mentioned orientation,² and how they had an hour-long session on it when she first started.³ Similarly, Julia Summers brought up orientation and said “it seemed pretty basic,” but also discussed an odd instance that occurred:

and there was this really awkward moment where he [the speaker] said ‘well, I don’t think Lord is masculine’ and I could feel some people like ‘uuuhhhhhh, you know, I don’t really know if you’re right’...

These talks at orientation are given by faculty members. This means that there are disagreements with the idea of what constitutes inclusive language within the faculty.⁴ Perhaps this is one reason why the students notice a few issues with enforcement. If different words are being enforced by different teachers, it would be confusing.

When talking about enforcement, Edward Myles mentioned that sometimes professors mention that there can be other ways to talk about God, rather than using exclusively male terms. He elaborated that this broadened people’s thoughts, because there is “no one right way” to talk about God.⁵

Kimberly Marshall also talked about how she had heard professors “remind,” not “reprimand,” students that they can think of God in different ways. She spoke about how

¹ December 12, 2013.

² December 2, 2013.

³ It has not been this long in recent years.

⁴ Many faculty members do think that “Lord” is masculine, though apparently others do not.

⁵ December 12, 2013.

the inclusive language policy was good in general, because it forces people to think differently.

I think the inclusive language policy is... it can be difficult to deal with at times, but I think that's it's good in general, 'cause it forces you to think about different ways to talk about God, and it forces you to be very aware of how your own... preconceptions are, you know, formed, and how you have engrained sexism and racism that you don't even realize you have.⁶

She continued on to note that the inclusive language policy mostly dealt with issues surrounding gender, but that it could be targeting other issues as well, like race.

In her interview, Lina Santos said, "I think it's important. I mean, it shocked me when I came here, cause I come from a tradition where, for example, we always refer to God as 'he.' But I saw the value in it." She continued:

Honoring the fact that God is not gendered -I think that's the theological foundation of it... I think it's important, I think it's honoring God... at this level, when we're training to be ministers, I think it's important to make that part of our vocabulary.⁷

Gabriel Porter said similar things, but added more detail. In general, he described the inclusive language policy as "a very complex, nuanced way of thinking" that not everyone will understand. He spoke specifically about the students not fulfilling this obligation, and why he thought that could be happening:

I think, that some of the students don't recognize how important it is to some of the faculty. So it's more than just a -a kind of grammar issue... and I think that's -for some of the students... because the inclusive language tends to be housed in a frame-of-reference that comes with grammar and linguistics then students are already struggling with how to read and how to write and so the assumption that students who are in the MDiv program already are good writers, or already know how to frame - many of them are still working with the tools of language, much less writing good papers. And so they're not just dealing with the ideas, they're really still dealing with the 'how do I write well,' 'how do I organize my paper'... And so when the inclusive language statement comes, they're

⁶ December 12, 2013.

⁷ December 12, 2013.

not able to separate that from my grammar habits, or my writing habits, rather than recognizing that it's an ethical commitment; that this language also goes with certain expectations or certain ways that society functions, you know...⁸

Both Lina Santos and Gabriel Porter spoke in different ways about the grammar aspect of the policy, and both of them are correct. It *is* something that needs to be added to the vocabulary of students –different names for God, different ways of speaking or writing about God. Nevertheless, it also cannot be *just* a grammar issue, because it is an ethical and theological commitment as well. Lina Santos spoke about honoring God through inclusive language, while Gabriel Porter emphasized social and ethical commitments to people (specifically women). The inclusive language policy is important for both theological and social reasons, as the policy itself elaborates.

Policy Enforcement

Brenda Winfield had originally been excited when she heard about the inclusive language policy. She didn't choose Theological Seminary for the policy, but she explained "with the Inclusive Language Policy I was like 'goddamn, I definitely chose the right spot!' and it made me be more intentional." However, she felt that it was not being enforced. The first time she mentioned the inclusive language policy, she put it in quotation marks with her hands before elaborating:

We say it's inclusive but it's an issue of 'do we really enforce it'? And since I came here ... the force -the enforcement of the policy has really gone down the tubes.⁹

She talked about classes, and how the policy is usually in syllabi, but she had recently taken a required class that did not have the policy in the syllabus and entailed books that

⁸ November 14, 2013.

⁹ December 2, 2013.

used exclusively male theological language. She felt very disappointed about the lack of discussion around the exclusively male language, and also about the lack of enforcement.

Isabelle Grey mentioned similar issues. She said that the policy had not been enforced in classes like they said it would be at orientation. “Even in classes, it was just he, he, he, Father God -we would laugh and say penis God,” she told me before recalling how she would ask herself (and sometimes others) “what happened to the inclusive language?”¹⁰

Gabriel Porter also referenced the fact that some teachers do not call out masculine theological language while in class. Kimberly Marshall viewed the teachers, generally, as modeling inclusive language and encouraging students to use it. She talked about issues with enforcing the policy from a professor’s point of view, sympathizing with the difficulty of:

trying to balance the need and the... requirement to have -to say you know what, God is not just man, God is not just woman, God is more than what we can say... with all of the people who come in and aren’t quite ready to let that go... I think that’s a hard balance.¹¹

Julia Summers also spoke about the potential difficulties of enforcing it from the professor’s positions:

But, I mean, I’m glad that there’s a policy, I just feel like it only -it doesn’t get enforced necessarily. And I’m not an educator, and so I can only imagine that it would be difficult when you’re talking about faith things and you’re trying to figure out how to let people articulate what they’re thinking without embarrassing them, without cutting them off... but on the other hand it’s just like [sigh]¹²

The students themselves can see many issues with how the inclusive language policy is enforced by the teachers, and most of them sympathize with the fact that it is not

¹⁰ December 4, 2013.

¹¹ November 14, 2013.

¹² December 3, 2013.

easy to enforce this policy. There is a struggle for professors seen by the students between enforcing the policy and affirming students and allowing them to grow at their own pace.

Gabriel Porter spoke more extensively about affirming people's abilities as pastors, or future pastors, with the added ethical and social dimension of the issue of also upholding the inclusive language policy:

[It's] the difficulty of being able to affirm people and let people learn how to be good at what they're doing, and yet at the same time the struggle with using the right language and being committed as a community to making sure that women are given at least as much agency as men.¹³

Two participants discussed aspects of enforcing the policy themselves. Julia Summers talked about how she has corrected people who used sexist God language in classes after the class ended. Outside of school, she asked her own father to stop praying to "Father God," instead changing to "Gracious God."¹⁴

Gabriel Porter also discussed enforcing the policy, but in a different way. He told a story about a special worship service that had taken place, led by the African American group in the seminary. A friend of his spoke who had been a student at Theological Seminary for over two years, but he used male theological language for the entire service. Gabriel noticed that faculty were present but, as far as he knew, did not talk to the other student about the sexist language used. "In all honesty, I think I should have been -I guess it falls on me," he told me, expressing his thought that he should have gone to his friend and had this conversation.

But for me, though, see this is what creates a problem for me, is because I... as a white male... I want to be able to affirm even the fact that they are using the space, you know, and so, I don't want to come across as 'oh,

¹³ November 14, 2013.

¹⁴ December 3, 2013.

I'm the white male know-it-all, so now I'm telling you what to do.' And so I always am struggling with that balance of having my own ethical commitments and yet at the same time not wanting to be in control.¹⁵

According to the interviews, some difficulties for professors in enforcing the policy would be that the student would feel embarrassed, that the traditions (and the student and their beliefs) would not be honored, and/or that the student(s) would be silenced. For students enforcing the policy on other students, though, other factors of oppression can come into play to make it difficult, as Gabriel described. Indeed, all of these difficulties are true regardless of position –student or faculty.

Policy as Positive and Negative

Laci Bell also struggled with the inclusive language policy in a different way. Since she knew what it felt like to be a part of an oppressed group, she did not want to oppress other people by forcing them to change their language for God.

While I want everybody to be on the same page, and I know the academic standards... I don't feel right about forcing my beliefs as far as genders and images of God onto somebody. And if you are in that group which is called oppressed, why should you be forced to take that on? Why should you be forced to call God other than what you image it? So I understand both ways... So, while I want them to be at one place, they're not, and I - I'm trying to respect that too, and they should be allowed -whoever should be allowed to image God in the way they want to. Hopefully it's positive.¹⁶

Alisha Galles had a lot of critique against the inclusive language policy, but ultimately did not say if she agreed or disagreed with it. She said, "I think it could be a good thing. I think you gotta allow for some space for personal relationship with God though." She explained that it might be a good thing for people who aren't comfortable

¹⁵ November 14, 2013.

¹⁶ November 18, 2013.

with their relationship with God, but for the person who is comfortable, “that kinda takes away from who they are.”¹⁷

She criticized the idea that God has to “fit everyone in that particular space at the same time and in the same way,” which she called “corporate.” Rather than addressing God corporately, she appreciated when people were open about their relationship with God, addressing God however they normally did. She preferred this to broader (more inclusive) ways of addressing God, as it was more personal and intimate instead of distant.¹⁸

In contrast, Lydia Rowe said almost the exact opposite idea. While she also did not state whether or not she approved of the policy, she understood that people use different names for God because “we all come out of different -in an ecumenical place like this, we all come out of very different ways of thinking and knowing God.” She spoke specifically about leading worship services and naming God by saying “there’s no getting it right, it’s getting it broad enough that people will find their place, or their entry-point at some point.”¹⁹

Kerry Matthews spoke extensively about gender neutral language in chapel services, but did not say whether she agreed or disagreed with the policy. She said that she used to think that the variety of names for God in worship was a good thing, but found that it is distracting.

I’ve never been able to glam on to anything as having spiritual or religious meaning... and say “that’s for me,” because it’s always so neural -you know, genderized, neutral, inclusive, careful, careful, careful, careful...²⁰

¹⁷ January 29, 2014.

¹⁸ Alisha Galles, January 29, 2014.

¹⁹ December 9, 2013.

²⁰ November 11, 2013.

For Kerry, too much inclusivity could lead to distraction, and potentially some anxiety, when a variety of names for God are used. She struggled to say that it (the variety in liturgy and/or names for God) could be beneficial, even though she saw inclusivity as a “good thing.”

Two other interview participants, Tammy Kemp and Jonathan Key, did not have anything to say on the policy itself, but did talk about using inclusive language in different ways. For Jonathan, his idea of being inclusive focused more on being together or unified with other congregants, which reflects his background as a Quaker.²¹ Tammy, a United Methodist, talked about using inclusive language depending on the people she was praying with, and about being cognizant of inclusivity and diversity in an inter-faith context.²²

Policy as Negative

Other people who disagreed with the policy framed it as something they were forced to comply with. Eloise Taplin spoke about how she had a hard time with the inclusive language policy when she first came to Theological Seminary, because of her background. She elaborated that she respects the policy, but “I don’t think it should be forced on anyone, because of different cultures...” She said:

I don’t agree with it... the reason is, again, from my background. You were raised one way -with Father God, and for me to change that language, I would be upsetting the people.²³

Later, she spoke about how, once she was preaching in a church, she wondered if she should use “Father God” language, or if she should try to use inclusive language.

Eventually, she felt God (and/or the Holy Spirit) telling her to “let it go” and say what the

²¹ December 4, 2013.

²² December 12, 2013.

²³ January 29, 2014.

congregation needed to hear. Since then, she has returned back to “Father God” language outside of the seminary.²⁴

Josiah Harries was also against the policy, because he felt it did not accurately reflect the traditions and doctrines of the denominations represented at Theological Seminary. When asked about the inclusive language policy, he said:

Some of it... take into account that I’m a little older...I’ve seen the “PC wars” -the “political correctness wars” and it’s an unhappy aspect of academic life, so that was partly my reaction. I’m perfectly happy to swap out mankind for humankind... but when our liturgy -our Episcopal liturgy keeps referring to the trinity as, you know, God the Father, God the Son, God the ... I’m not about to eliminate all references to God -God the Father. I’ll take my lumps.²⁵

Like Josiah, Eloise Taplin disagreed with the policy because of her background and tradition, which is United Methodist. Eloise spoke about how the policy was enforced on all of her papers –all the “Father God” names were crossed out and marked.²⁶ Josiah Harris did not talk about his own papers, or if he had felt the implementation of the policy in any way personally. Since it was his first semester, and he was interviewed before the end of the term, it may not have come up in his work at that point in time. It also might not have been relevant, since he did not ever address God as “Father God” in our interview, and seemed to only be concerned with how it was used in liturgy. Neither of these participants mentioned potential reasons for why the policy was in place, as Lina Santos and Gabriel Porter did,²⁷ and ultimately, Eloise and Josiah decided that they did not or would not need to adhere to the policy during and/or after their education.

²⁴ January 29, 2014.

²⁵ December 5, 2013.

²⁶ January 29, 2014.

²⁷ They referenced the theological and ethical/social foundations of the policy.

Discussion

There seems to be a perceived disconnect between the inclusive language policy itself and how it is enforced, as well as why it is important (if the people consider it important at all). Only a handful of interview participants seemed to understand either the theological or ethical/social commitments at play in the policy, and even then, they struggled with implementing the policy for a variety of reasons, reasons that in some ways reflect a commitment to inclusivity and diversity, albeit in terms of theologies and denominational backgrounds.

Two participants in particular spoke about how the inclusive language policy could be seen by people who disagree with it. Kimberly Marshall talked about people complaining and asking “why are you trying to take my image of God as Father away from me?” Personally, she felt that people should not come to seminary if they were not ready to challenge some of their pre-conceptions, specifically about God. “Suck it up and deal with it,” she said.²⁸

Gabriel Porter also discussed people feeling like their God representations were being taken away:

Changing the language is like changing -the language is so important... I think so many people have been shaped and formed by that language that attempting to change it is like asking them...

[me: It's a personal attack?]

Right, so they're not able to recognize the -so it's not just for them about a grammar... it's about 'why are you taking my songs away'... there's this kind of expectation that things have always been this way, we shouldn't change them, and particularly then when you tie that with the theology of

²⁸ December 12, 2013.

the word of God, for some people, then you're not just moving into heresy but then this is really dangerous type of stuff.²⁹

Instead of seeing the policy as an ethical and theological commitment, it can easily be seen as a personal attack by people who do not agree with it. This can be seen partially in Eloise Taplin's statements and to a lesser extent in Josiah Harris' and Alisha Galles' statements as well. For the people who see the inclusive language policy this way, as something that takes away from or erases their personal relationship with God (or their traditions naming of God), it is then easy to think that the inclusive language policy leads to an impersonal or distant God.

IMPERSONAL GOD POTENTIAL

The inclusive language policy of Theological Seminary specifically states that there are words that embody our relationship with God without being exclusively masculine. It suggests using words like "Creator," "Holy One," or "Mother/Father." These are words that are not impersonal, but are also not exclusive, as suggested by the inclusive language policy of the school.

Even so, among some of my interview participants, a theme of concern arose around the idea that gender neutral theological language makes God impersonal, or distant. Kerry Matthews said that she was looking for a gender neutral name for God that she could use consistently, but that "it's hard because then it becomes impersonal."³⁰ Eloise Taplin said that, in public, she refers to God as just God, and that it "isn't personal."³¹ For Alisha Galles, addressing God "corporately" is the opposite of addressing God personally. Naming God "corporately" so that God fits everyone in a

²⁹ November 14, 2013.

³⁰ November 11, 2013.

³¹ January 29, 2014.

place in the same way is not intimate, and forcing people to address God this way “kinda takes away from who they are.”³²

Kimberly Marshall elaborated on a similar idea. She said that people get uncomfortable if a person begins a prayer with something like “Gracious Being God,” because the congregation begins to wonder if it is a Christian prayer. She explained there is a deep need to affirm the “uniqueness and individuality” of the Christian God. Perhaps this is partially where the discomfort of gender neutral names and titles for God stems from.³³

INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE

Changing Service Language

In the worship services at Theological Seminary, there were times where congregants themselves changed masculine theological language. Often, this meant changing pronouns of God from “he” to “God.” Most of the time, this happened with responsive scripture readings with excessive male God language. For instance, here was a responsive reading from November 14, 2013, that I heard people around me trying to actively change:

Responsive Reading of Psalm 98:1-10
 Sing to the LORD a new song,
 For he has done marvelous things.
 With his right hand and his holy arm
 Has he won for himself the victory.
 The LORD has made known his victory;
 His righteousness has he openly shown in the sight of the nations.
 He remembers his mercy and faithfulness to the house of Israel,
 And all the ends of the earth have seen the victory of our God.

³² January 29, 2014.

³³ December 12, 2013.

This continued on for another thirteen lines. While people tried to change this language in order to be more inclusive, it was nearly impossible to do in real time. A woman who was standing just two rows ahead of me only made it to the sixth line by using the words “God” and “Godself,” but she eventually had to give up because it is overwhelming. This was not the only time in worship services where responsive scripture passages had comprehensive masculine theological language.³⁴

Unfortunately, I am not sure how often congregants attempted to change masculine language in the liturgy, because I was limited to only being able to hear the people around me. At least in the area that I was sitting in, it happened quite a few times during the thirty seven services.³⁵

Perhaps this is a way of members of the congregation to critique the choice of leaders to use texts that have masculine God language. Perhaps the people who do this are simply the most passionate about using inclusive theological language. There could be a variety of reasons as to why people do this, but it does happen every once in a while, and often by multiple people.

Special Services

There were also services that incorporated much more masculine theological language than the average service. Even some interview participants picked up on this, and noted that in special services, male God language is used more often. Gabriel Porter mentioned the Black/African American group on campus and how that service used

³⁴ It should also be noted that there are translations of the Bible that are aimed towards being gender neutral. Obviously, these translations are not chosen often for responsive readings.

³⁵ It also happened occasionally during songs. It was made more obvious because often the music director would change words as he was singing. For instance, in a song on September 19, 2013, he changed the phrase “he’s the open door” to “God’s the open door.”

masculine God language in a story discussed earlier.³⁶ Brenda Winfield also mentioned this same group, along with other groups that represented racial minorities, as being particularly stuck in the title of “Father God” and the pronoun “he.”³⁷ Isabelle Grey echoed this thought,³⁸ as did Laci Bell.³⁹

These recollections are fairly accurate. When a group of Asian/Asian American students led worship, there were 10 uses of “he” in reference to God and 7 uses of the title “Lord.”⁴⁰ When the Black/African American group led worship, there were 10 uses of “he” in reference to God, 30 uses of the title “Lord,” and 5 uses of “Father” in reference to God.⁴¹ Usually, this many male titles are not used in services (the average use of the title “Lord,” including these services, was about 5 per service; without the four services in this section, it was about 2.6 per service).

The recollections of my participants overlooked another very male-oriented theological standpoint. Twice during the August-December 2013 semester, the worship was fashioned after Episcopal liturgy, and had an Episcopal leader from outside of the institution. These services, along with other special services, were discussed in chapter three. In the first Episcopal service, there were 14 uses of the pronoun “he” in reference to God, 10 uses of “Lord,” and 5 uses of “Father.”⁴² The second time, there were 12 uses of the pronoun “he,” 19 uses of “Lord,” and 1 reference to “Father.”⁴³ Interestingly, though, during this second service, the speaker altered some of the liturgy in order to be

³⁶ November 14, 2013.

³⁷ December 2, 2013.

³⁸ December 4, 2013.

³⁹ November 18, 2013.

⁴⁰ September 10, 2013.

⁴¹ November 12, 2013.

⁴² October 22, 2013.

⁴³ November 14, 2013.

more inclusive. Five times instead of referring to God as “Father,” as was written in the liturgy in the bulletin, he instead changed the language to “God,” or once to “Creator.”

In two interviews, extemporaneous prayers, or prayers that are made up on the spot in services, were mentioned as particular points where sexist God language was more likely to be used in worship. Isabelle Grey, who thinks Theological Seminary is not as inclusive as it could be in worship, said:

I think we do a better job of using inclusive language and of using non-gendered metaphors ... for God... when it's written in the liturgy. But I find that -it's in those extemporaneous prayers that the male language comes in, even though we're supposed to be conscious of keeping it out and it just makes me bristle.⁴⁴

Kimberly Marshall, who generally thinks inclusive language is being used with a few exceptions, also recognized the problem:

Most of the time in chapel, I feel like it's used, but it's also not always, you know, there are definitely times in chapel when... it's not... I don't usually hear people say 'man' -like, not mankind -but I hear people refer to God as 'he' a lot... especially in, like, extemporaneous prayers... and again, you know, how do you monitor [inclusive language] in that kind of setting?⁴⁵

Unfortunately, I do not have the data necessary on the prayers of the worship services to show whether or not these statements are accurate. It would make sense if this was the case. As shown by the second Episcopal service, perhaps some masculine God language is noticeable when it is written down, and thus easier to change. Of course, masculine language was still used throughout the service, as shown above, and it was not

⁴⁴ December 4, 2013.

⁴⁵ December 12, 2013.

remembered by many interview participants even though they recalled other racial groups when they used masculine God language.⁴⁶

DISCUSSION

People have a lot to say about the inclusive language policy at Theological Seminary. Generally, participants agreed that the policy itself was positive, or, at the very least, necessary. Some of these people were concerned about how the policy was or could be enforced, others were fairly certain that it was not enforced the way it should be, and others did not comment on the enforcement of the policy at all. Of these people, who agreed that the policy was positive (regardless of the enforcement), most of them liked the policy. A small group of participants saw the policy as negative for a variety of reasons, mostly due to traditional beliefs and understandings.

These traditional beliefs and understandings can make it seem like someone's idea of God is being taken away from them when they are confronted by something like the inclusive language policy. Indeed, complying with the inclusive language policy makes some people feel like they are distancing themselves from God, or that this type of language makes God impersonal.

Many people are afraid of change. People like habits and routine. Change creates chaos, and it is unsettling. Ultimately, change is what the inclusive language policy is oriented towards. Some people are encouraging that, and others are against it. The final chapter discusses the difficulties with changing traditional God language, and provides alternative ways of thinking about the inclusive language policy.

⁴⁶ One participant, Julia Summers (December 3, 2013), did name Episcopalians as perpetuating male theological language.

CHAPTER SIX

“He has to be love... and ‘he,’ see... it’s funny, ‘cause I grew up with that so much ... I was talking to somebody recently and I said, ‘you know, I don’t have a problem with the idea that God is male or female, that God is amorphous and you can’t define God,’ but it still makes me uncomfortable when people say ‘she’ for God. Just ‘cause you grow up... it’s not that I’m like ‘ew, that’s wrong, you can’t say that,’ it’s just that I’m like ‘oh, that feels weird for me,’ I’m just so unused to hearing it.” Kimberly Marshall, December 12, 2013.

Ultimately, the inclusive language policy of Theological Seminary is aimed at facilitating change in the ways people speak (and think) about God. As shown by this paper, this has varying levels of success on both a communal level and individual level. The difficulty of changing theological language was discussed by a few interview participants.

Kerry Matthews was the most outspoken about how changing traditional theological language would be difficult.

But working in the church, in the front lines of ministry... it’s very hard to get those ideas -these ideas [of inclusive language] -into the church, because people just... it’s always a “he,” it’s always a “him” and for me to talk any other way would make me more... it’d be harder for them.¹

Gabriel Porter mentioned earlier that people see changing traditional language as a personal attack.² Kimberly Marshall said that people see it as taking their image of “Father God” away,³ rather than seeing it as an opening for more creative discussion around God and what people call God. Brenda Winfield mentioned that some people

¹ November 11, 2013.

² November 14, 2013.

³ December 12, 2013.

have such rigid ideas of God that their “image of God would shatter” if feminine terms were used consistently.⁴

One participant, Laci Bell, uses gender inclusive metaphors personally but gender neutral ones in public depending on the context. Privately, she would call God both God and Goddess. Generally, in public, she addresses God as “Creator” or “Mother-Father God,” unless she is in feminist circles where she might say Goddess, or God the Mother. She does not see God as a being or person, but she told me:

I see God as more of a Mother, and that’s more nurturing for me and more healing, seeing that I have some pretty big wounds from the “Father God” image and all the sexism in the institution.⁵

Another participant, Isabelle Grey told me that she absolutely refuses to use male language for God in services she leads in churches outside the seminary. They make her cringe, so she uses other names for God. She said,

I’m not really sure that they miss the “Father God,” or that they even notice it, to be honest -notice that it’s gone. That being said, I haven’t replaced Father God with Mother God, now, so I’ve said the baker-woman God a few times... I’m very careful about not pushing uber-feminine language in place of [masculine language] so just using those... no, they don’t have a problem with it.⁶

She did admit that using the pronoun “she” in reference to God would “jar the congregation.” “We’re not there yet,” she said, and told me that the “re-training” has to be done very gradually.

Personal Pronoun Usage

Throughout her interview, Kerry Matthews used “he” pronouns in reference to God. While she did explain that she was trying to see God as “more of a caretaker than a

⁴ December 2, 2013.

⁵ November 18, 2013.

⁶ December 4, 2013.

‘him,’”⁷ she still used “he” pronouns with no further correction. Jonathan Key (a Quaker) did the same thing in his interview: when he noticed that he said “he” in reference to God, he said that it was due to his “normal traditional upbringing,” and then continued to use “he” pronouns to discuss God with no further correction.⁸

Eloise Taplin, a United Methodist, and Alisha Galles, a Baptist, also used “he” pronouns exclusively when talking about God, but neither of them attempted to correct this language or explained it in any way, even when discussing the inclusive language policy. All four of these people have different denominations, races, and class years, but they tended to be older (40-50 years old).⁹

Some other participants caught themselves once in the interview using a “he” pronoun, but then discussed it and did not use it again. This occurred in both Lina Santos and Kimberly Marshall’s interview, and both of them explained that it was due to their upbringing. However, after that, neither of these two interview participants used that type of language for God again.

For these six people, there is no relationship between their class year or denomination and the language they used. Both Kimberly Marshall and Lina Santos were in favor of the inclusive language policy, even with concerns over enforcement. Perhaps this is why they were intentional about using it, even after they said “he,” because they ultimately agreed with the policy.

Throughout his interview, Jonathan Key was more focused on the unity of the congregation than the ways people talk about God, and did not say whether or not he agreed with the policy. Kerry Matthews struggled with the policy and the variety of

⁷⁷ November 11, 2013.

⁸ December 4, 2013.

⁹ With the exception of Jonathan Key, who is in his mid-20s.

(distracting) ways people talk about God, but did not say if she agreed with it. Perhaps this is why these two people still fell back into “he” language for God, because they were focused on topics outside of the policy (like the unity of the congregation) or they were unsure about the benefits of the policy.

Both Eloise Taplin and Alisha Galles used exclusively male language. Only Eloise Taplin said she disagreed with the policy, because of different cultures and how she was raised. This explains why she did not adhere to it. Alisha Galles, however, did not say if she favored the policy or not, just that she would prefer if it gave room for people’s personal relationships with God. Her language, then, reflects her personal relationship with God, and may be why she did not change her language to be more inclusive.

Ultimately, these instances reveal to whom people feel they are answerable. Most of my participants did not use male-oriented language in reference to God. Josiah Harris and Laci Bell, for instance, both were quicker to use “it” than “he” or “she” in reference to God, because neither of them saw God in anthropocentric terms, but neither of them were completely comfortable with the policy either. Other people, like Edward Myles and Brenda Winfield, did not have any issues with pronouns during the interview, and were supportive of the policy. And yet, some people made a choice in the interview to either change their “he” language, or not to –and other people did not think there was really a choice to make at all. These people are showing their loyalties, and whether or not they feel answerable to Theological Seminary’s inclusive language policy.

And at some points, some of them do. For instance, Eloise Taplin did feel answerable to the policy when she prayed in worship services at the seminary. She did

not say “Father God” in prayers, and had to change the language she used in her papers in order to be more inclusive. However, in her own congregation, she does not maintain inclusive language. This policy did not seem important to her in any ethical or theological way, but only as a way to get through seminary.

Some people are struggling more with what it would mean to take the inclusive language policy from seminary out into a church, like Kerry Matthews or Julia Summers, who both commented on the difficulty of changing traditional language in the church. Isabelle Grey, however, said that she was not having many problems slowly changing the language.

Institutional Language

When I asked students who helped to plan the services how exactly they helped to plan the services, they all said that generally they did not plan at all, they only helped to set up and take down the worship space. Thus, their own personal views were not reflected in any scripted liturgical language. According to the student interviews, the chaplain and music director mostly do the actual planning of the services. On the bulletins, most often no credit is given for where the liturgy comes from or who wrote it. There were multiple times that credit writing for the liturgy or call to worship was given to the chaplain at the end of the bulletin, and there were also multiple times credit was given elsewhere (books, websites, the World Council of Churches, etc.)¹⁰ It was clear that both the chaplain and music director make efforts to use inclusive language.¹¹

¹⁰ This credit is just given for parts of the liturgy –the call to worship, the communion words –but not for the entire service liturgy.

¹¹ The music director, however, does not see the word “Lord” as a masculine title for God, and that must be mentioned.

As discussed in the previous chapter, the language of the service changes depending on who/what group is leading the service. Within the liturgy written by the chaplain herself, there is not male/masculine God language, but the communion liturgy written by her has some of the emphasis on God's grace and human's fallen nature, as discussed in chapter four briefly. This could potentially be a gendered dynamic, or it could be denominational, or it could be due to the school's emphasis on justice and people's participation in injustice.

Because there are gaps in the credit of the bulletins, and I do not want to assume how much planning people did, I do not know who wrote what aspect of each service or what influence that had over the language used in each service.

There were a few times in interviews when people mentioned classes not upholding the inclusive language policy –Brenda Winfield and Isabelle Grey specifically talked about this. Institutional representatives, the professors, seem to have individualized approaches to the inclusive language policy. Some people (Eloise Taplin, Julia Summers, Edward Myles) did see the policy being enforced in their classes, but it is not the same for everyone, which makes me wonder how the institution reinforces the inclusive language policy on those who are representing it.

Future Ideas

This project only allowed me to view the inclusive language policy and theological language through the eyes of students. In a different project, it would be interesting to interview faculty members (institutional representatives) and the administration in order to get a better understanding of how such a policy is reproduced institutionally. Doing such a study would provide answers to such questions as: how are

faculty taught about the inclusive language policy; how much are faculty members expected (by the administration) to enforce the policy; what is the role of the worship space in relation to the inclusive language policy; etc.

Furthermore, in a longer study, I would have preferred to include focus groups in my methods, and I would have also liked to do participant observation for a full year in order to see if there are significant differences in liturgy based on holidays. For instance, the differences between looking forward to Advent and looking forward to Easter: what are the differences, if any? What sort of language is used for both? Also, with a longer project, I could try to get more interviews for a better representative sample.

My current research suggests that Theological Seminary, while probably much better than other places, has not met its goals of inclusive language in two ways. First, for many, using gender neutral language, especially the term God, which can still mean a male to many using it or listening to it, is their interpretation of inclusive language. Second, and most important, very few see inclusive language as including feminine language, raising the question of what does inclusive mean. There are some potential ways to attempt and change that, including more in-depth discussion with students on why inclusive theological language is important, more equal treatment regarding the policy by the faculty (trying to get the policy to be enforced by all staff), and/or providing students (and faculty) with a working list of names for God that are gender neutral or gender inclusive, so that they could have that resource for future use. Since much of my data is based on observing chapel services, and just four services included a majority of the masculine language, there also seems to be a need for more discussion of the

inclusive language policy with the various caucus groups, and outsiders, who plan worship.

DISCUSSION

Learning new ideas and concepts –especially about something so personal as religious belief –takes time. Students attend Theological Seminary from anywhere between two and five years (and maybe more than that for people on an extended track). Radical change in someone’s thinking, while possible, is difficult in that amount of time, especially when taking God Images and God Concepts into account.

God Concepts are what people are taught about God. This is what is happening at Theological Seminary for the most part. Students are being taught about God, among other things, and this is contributing to their God Concept. Yet God Concepts also go back through people’s lives to their childhood. The God Image is how people feel about God, it is emotional and generally unconscious, reflecting that lifelong rooting. The God Image is much harder to change than the God Concept. Together, the two ideas make up a person’s God representation. According to Louis Hoffman, the God Image can be influenced by multiple factors, rather than just the initial relationship to the primary caregiver (2004, 11; 2005, 135). This means that it is possible to change someone’s God representation in some ways that differ from how they were raised to think of God, or how they feel about God.

Change is never easy. The inclusive language policy can easily be viewed as taking away one idea of God –that of God as male. This can be seen in a few interviews, and if my sample size had been larger, it might have been a more prevalent idea. However, male names and ideas of God do not need to be erased in order to obtain

inclusivity;¹² rather, other genders should to be emphasized as well, alongside the masculine gender. Inclusive theological language requires people to be creative when talking about or naming God, so that they do not fall back into traditional, exclusive, and potentially harmful stereotypes. In my mind, creativity is key in individual use of inclusive language, because it allows people's ideas about God to grow constantly, instead of narrowing into one singular idea about God.

Ideally, the inclusive language policy would involve people acknowledging the theological and social reasons for its implementation. If God is beyond limits, people should refer to God in a multitude of ways. If one metaphor for God loses its symbolic nature and instead becomes the only way for God to be recognized, that metaphor becomes an idol (McFague, 1982a, 1982b; Johnson, 1992). Additionally, seeing God as male limits women's ability to see themselves as created in God's image (Johnson, 1992, 5). This impacts their personal growth, self-esteem, and self-worth (Sanford and Donovan, 1985; Aldredge-Clanton, 1991; Stucky-Abbott, 1993; Hoffman, 2004).

The theological and ethical foundations of the inclusive language policy need to be discussed more thoroughly with the students. While this will not change everyone's opinions on whether or not the policy is useful, it would better inform people who choose to invoke inclusive language, and it could also benefit enforcement of the policy. Only a few of my participants mentioned these reasons for the policy, and no one who opposed it brought up these reasons for its usage. However, this could change with a larger sample size.

Traditional theological language cannot just be forgotten in a matter of years. Potentially, however, it can be added to, in order to foster the usage of inclusive God

¹² This is, of course, one option for inclusivity.

language. While not everyone is fond of variety, especially in a religious setting,¹³ providing resources and alternative names for God is one way of changing traditional language and instigating inclusive language.

¹³ See chapter two.

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