

Sex and the Divine Persons: Problematic English language in *The Church of the Triune God*.

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The purpose of this communication is to consider some important words used in *The Church of the Triune God: Cyprus Agreed Statement of the International Commission for Anglican-Orthodox Theological dialogue 2008*.

The Document we are to consider is the third agreed statement of the International Commission for the Anglican-Orthodox Dialogue, completed at Kyykos, Cyprus, in 2005 and published in January 2007, when the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Ecumenical Patriarch together attended a Thanksgiving in Westminster Abbey. Copies both electronic and bound are available from the Anglican Communion Office. A valuable Briefing Paper is available, prepared for the General Synod of the Church of England (GS 1706): 'Anglican-Orthodox Theological dialogue *The Church of the Triune God*. Briefing paper by the Faith and Order Advisory Group of the Council for Christian Unity on the Cyprus Agreed Statement of the International Commission for Anglican-Orthodox Theological Dialogue', 2008. This Briefing Paper includes a short description and history of the Orthodox Church, a history of Anglican-Orthodox discussions, a commentary on the Statement, and a brief assessment and critique.

The Anglican *Briefing Paper* summarizes the achievement of the Statement as follows:

'At the heart of the document is the belief that what is most characteristic of the church is that it participates in the life of the divine Trinity and indeed that it is only in virtue of this participation that we can speak of the Trinity at all. The word that most centrally describes the nature of the divine life is communion. The Trinity is not the manifestation in three different forms of some underlying divine essence or substance; nor is it a fellowship of three independent individuals; the Trinity is the communion of three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, whose very existence cannot be thought apart from their interrelationships.'

It is fair to see this as an advance in theological understanding, not merely in Anglican-Orthodox relations. The Church reflects in its life and worship the communion which is the life of the Holy Trinity.

Two English terms are used in the *Statement*, which have very recently come into widespread use in ways not previously regular. They are 'gender' and 'iconic'.

'**Gender**' now commonly occurs where 'sex' was previously used. This is in part a consequence of the popular use of 'sex' to refer to sexual activity and especially physical intercourse. The change may also be due to sociologists expanding the meaning of 'gender' to apply to sexually oriented groups and attitudes. The use of 'gender' to refer to the sex of a person or other organism is now widespread even in academic and official documents. It is not surprising to find this use in the *Statement*. However, in correct old-fashioned English (American as well as British English) there are two sexes (= Latin *sexus*) of persons, male and female, and four genders or classes (Latin *genera*) of nouns and pronouns: masculine (usually associated with males), feminine (usually associated with females), neuter, and common. Care is needed with this language.

VII 28 of the *Statement* says that 'the language of "Father" and "Son" in Christian theology is not gendered: it refers only to the relations of these two Persons of the Trinity and

to the derivation according to existence of the one from the other.’ This is difficult to understand: *linguistically* ‘Father’ and ‘Son’ are both unambiguously masculine in gender. What the writers mean, and should have said, is that the masculine gender of the words does not imply that the Persons of the Godhead are sexually male.

Where the matter is more fully discussed in IV 2-14, the *Statement* affirms that ‘God is beyond gender and sexuality’ (IV 4). This applies even in the incarnation of Christ as a male person (IV 6-7). Patristic quotations in support of these propositions are helpful, including a typical defence by St Gregory of Nyssa of the view that every description of God is a hazardous human invention (ἐπίνοια), a view which he and St Basil developed against Eunomius’ assertion that God is by definition ‘not begotten’, and thus his (begotten) Son cannot be in essence God.

God beyond sexuality and gender is however barely compatible with the claim of ‘**iconic**’ status for the names of Father and Son (and Spirit) in the Trinity (I 36-41 and often in the *Statement*). It is specifically argued that ‘these words are not metaphorical, but express the ontological derivation of the Three Persons and the total personal mutuality thus designated ... they are transparent to the reality of God’ (I 39). Unfortunately ‘iconic’ has in the past decade become very popular in English to mean something different: a great footballer, for instance, or sports ground, or building, or author, is spoken of as ‘iconic’ just because each is a famous example of its kind. The authors of the *Statement* could not know that this change in English usage would happen: we mention it because it might add to the confusion of present-day readers. The authors clearly adopt the word in their own definition. Note the words which we now italicize: ‘another kind of language which *we may call* iconic’ (I 36); ‘these words *may be called* iconic: they are transparent to the reality of God’ (I 39). It is well said that this argument operates ‘within the mutual communion of the Church.’

It is the further statement about this ‘iconic’ language, which might be challenged. It is that, while God as Trinity may be understood by the Scriptures and the Fathers of the Church in a number of metaphors from the natural world, and from human relations, ‘Christian theology is not using an illustrative metaphor’ when it speaks of Father and Son, but refers to ‘the ontological derivation of the Three Persons and the total personal mutuality thus designated’ (I 39). This seems to mean that the terms are iconic because they imply (a) that the Son and Spirit derive their being from the Father, and (b) the Persons interpenetrate, exist ‘in’ each other. Against his opponent Eunomius, Gregory of Nyssa rightly emphasizes the Scriptural use of the terms Father and Son precisely because of this mutuality: they are preferred by the Scriptures and the Church just because they express the consubstantiality.

The question remains, whether this means that the words are not metaphorical. Could not the same mutuality of being be equally well expressed as Mother and Daughter? Two reasons may be suggested why the masculine terms are preferred in the Bible and the fathers. (a) The second Person is the subject of the Incarnation in the male human being, Jesus. On this more will be said. (b) The precedence of male over female in ancient society was absolute: empire and family alike needed a male superior. This male superiority has prevailed in almost all human societies throughout history. But it has come to be questioned in modern Europe and America because scientific advances have liberated women from bondage to child-rearing, and enabled them for leadership roles in science, education, medicine, law and government. This raises the question whether male precedence is necessary either in thinking about God, or in thinking about the governance of the Church.

Consequently, while the terms are for believers inescapable, because the New Testament constantly uses ‘Father’ and ‘Son’, as does the Baptismal Formula and Trinitarian theology, they may also carry important metaphorical force derived from the patriarchal

relationships of ancient societies. The supremacy of the Father means that to acknowledge another as Son and Heir and give all authority to him is to bestow the greatest possible privilege. All things that are the Father's belong also to the Son. St Paul argues that exactly this same privilege, of Son and Heir, is bestowed on believers by the Spirit (Gal 4.6); male and female are all one Son in Christ Jesus (Gal 3.28). This is why 'Father' and 'Son' are totally liberating to men and women alike, in a way that 'mother' and 'daughter' could never be. The liberation however all depends on a social *metaphor*, that of the supreme Father and the only Son and Heir, a model which no longer applies in the modern West. To make these terms 'iconic' could be taken to fix male supremacy into the dogma. It is better seen as a metaphor fixed in ancient society, wonderfully liberating to us if understood with its ancient context, and giving supreme insight into the causal relations and bonding within the Holy Trinity.

This question is near to something taught by St Gregory of Nyssa. He argues that the title 'Son of God' applies to the second Person of the Trinity in a non-metaphorical way, referring to his Nature, not in the same way that the title 'son of God' is acquired by other human beings (c. *Eun.* III,1 113-125 [*GNO* II 42-46; *PG* XLV 605-609]). This might seem to confirm the claim that the Father-Son relationship in the Godhead is 'iconic'. In a later passage, however, Gregory contends with Eunomius' argument that to take 'begetting' literally imports notions of passion into God, since all conception and birth implies passion. Gregory fixes on the one vital point, that the Son is called Son because he derives his being from the Father (c.*Eun.* III,2 11-17 [*GNO* II 55-57; *PG* XLV 620-624]). He goes on to praise the Evangelist John for beginning with other terminology before introducing 'Father' and 'Son':

To keep the uneducated hearer as far away as possible from passion, he did not in his prologue refer to Son, nor to Father, nor to begetting. This would prevent any one, hearing of the Father, being drawn down to the literal meaning of the term, or responding to the proclamation of the Son by taking it in its terrestrial sense, or tripping over the word 'begetting' like a stumbling-block. Instead of 'Father', he names the 'Beginning', instead of 'was begotten', simply 'was', and instead of 'Son', 'the Word'; and he says, 'In a Beginning was the Word' (*Jn* 1.1).

ὡς γὰρ ἂν μάλιστα πόρρω πάθους ἀπαγάγοι τὴν ἀγύμναστον ἀκοήν, οὐχ υἱὸν εἶπεν ἐν προοιμίῳ, οὐ πατέρα, οὐ γέννησιν, ἵνα μὴ τις ἐν πρώτοις ἢ πατὴρ ἀκούσας κατασυρῆ πρὸς τὴν πρόχειρον ἔμφασιν τοῦ ὀνόματος, ἢ υἱὸν μαθὼν κηρυσσόμενον κατὰ τὴν ὄδε συνήθειαν νοήσῃ τὸ ὄνομα, ἢ προσπαίσι τῷ ῥήματι τῆς γεννήσεως ὡς λίθῳ προσκόμματος· ἀλλ' ἀντὶ μὲν πατὴρ ἀρχὴν ὀνομάζει, ἀντὶ δὲ τοῦ ἐγεννήθη τὸ ἦν, ἀντὶ δὲ τοῦ υἱοῦ τὸν λόγον, καὶ φησιν, Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος. (c.*Eun.* III,2 17 [*GNO* II 57; *PG* XLV 624])

'Beginning' and 'Word' are duly supplemented, Gregory argues, in the Gospel to express the intimacy of the relationship of Nature by expressions like, 'The Word was with God' and 'the Word was God'. Only later (*Jn* 1.14) do we find the full statement: He manifested his glory, glory as of the Only-begotten Son of the Father. If Gregory is followed, the *Cyprus Statement* is right to fix on 'Father' and 'Son' as a vital expression of the originating relation and consubstantiality in the Holy Trinity, but wrong to deny that it is also a metaphor.

So while we need not dissent from the attempts both to immunize God from sexuality and to affirm that some symbols or models are invariable, the Statement has ambiguities, which could lead to misunderstanding. This is all the more unfortunate when the eucharistic

priest is also said to be iconic of Christ, feeding the argument that only a male can represent him (VI 19; VII 37/i). So we turn finally to the fact that the Lord Jesus is sexually male, and then to the matter of priesthood.

On the matter of Christ's humanity, the *Statement* makes it clear that it is as human that we confess him rather than as male, in keeping with the arguments of the Fathers of the Church (IV [2] 10-11). In order to be fully human, he had to be fully sexed, either male or female, and he was in fact male. Nevertheless, the humanity which he assumes includes both sexes, male and female. It could even be argued that, as born of the Blessed Virgin, he inherits the whole of his human nature from the female: he inherits nothing genetic from an earthly father. He 'became human', as the Creed puts it, ἐνηθρώπησεν. This consideration, which is fully worked out in the *Statement*, has consequences when we consider the priestly work of presbyters and bishops.

The presiding minister at the Eucharistic celebration is presented as 'iconic' of Christ, notably in an important paragraph (VI 19):

The priestly president of the eucharistic assembly exercises an iconic ministry. As the *Dublin Agreed Statement* made plain, 'In the Eucharist the eternal priesthood of Christ is constantly manifested in time. The celebrant, in the liturgical action, has a twofold ministry: as an icon of Christ, acting in the name of Christ towards the community and also as a representative of the community expressing the priesthood of the faithful' (*DAS* p.56). In the context of the Eucharist, the bishop or presbyter stands for Christ in a particular way. In taking bread and wine, giving thanks, breaking, and giving, the priest is configured to Christ at the Last Supper. The president draws together the life and prayer of the baptised, and offers them to the Father with the bread and wine. In the eucharistic prayer, the offering of praise and thanksgiving for the mighty deeds of God, culminating in the sacrifice of the paschal mystery, is offered for all creation. Received by the Father, the gifts of bread and wine are returned in the Holy Spirit as Christ's risen life, his body and blood, the bread of heaven and the cup of salvation.

In this strong and illuminating agreement, 'iconic' seems to be used in a more general way, and not as in the case of the Persons of the Holy Trinity. It appears to mean that the Eucharistic president functions *just like* our Lord Jesus Christ in his Last Supper and in his Paschal sacrifice. One is the image or model (εἰκὼν) of the other. This is confirmed in the *Statement* by the language of the first reservation of the Orthodox, which concerns what they see as the hasty movement of the Anglican churches in ordaining women as bishops and presbyters. In this reservation the Eucharistic president is said to impersonate Christ:

VII 37 (i) The eucharistic president acts in persona Christi. Although the Christ in whose person the eucharistic president acts is the eschatological Christ, we are not allowed to conclude from this, without a deeper examination of the matter, that maleness is not his specific human nature, and thus part of his identity. In stating that 'in Christ there is neither male nor female' Paul, as the context clearly shows, was referring to the situation which results from baptism, while Maximus the Confessor speaks of the overcoming of the division and conflict between the sexes and not of the ultimate elimination of their difference. This matter, the Orthodox feel, ought to have been taken into deeper consideration before any decision to ordain women was taken and acted on, particularly in the context of ecumenical dialogue.

This irenic approach, seeking to base consideration of contentious issues in theology, is typical of the *Statement*, and points in a direction which both Anglicans and Orthodox might profitably pursue. The purpose of this present contribution is to urge that care be taken in

such discussions with the terminology used, and especially ‘gender’ and ‘iconic’, where confusion and misunderstanding might easily arise both from changes in current English usage, and from new uses adopted in the *Statement*.