Could Gender be an Attribute of God?

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by

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The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined the thesis entitled

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and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

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DEDICATION

I am grateful to my mom and dad, whose unwavering dedication and sacrifices have made it possible for me and my siblings to pursue our education.

Also, I want to extend my thanks to my fiancée, Maryam, for her love, support, and understanding throughout this endeavor.

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Abstract

This thesis examines whether gender can be considered an attribute of God, examining Biblical depictions of God in masculine terms alongside modern egalitarian concerns within the context of Abrahamic religious traditions, particularly focusing on Catholic tradition in Christianity. One of the key questions that this thesis addresses is if attributing gender to God conflicts with *imago Dei* doctrine that says all humans equally bear the divine image. I argue that there is a conceptual *gap* between God's full attributes and those relevant for human embodiment of the *imago Dei*. I argue that God's gender needs not determine attributes within the *imago Dei*—that God's gender *can* be image-irrelevant. This distinction allows for harmonizing the traditional view of God's gender with the concepts of God's perfection and equal human dignity. Men and women can be equal image-bearers of a gendered God, if God's gender is not a constitutive part of the image. Furthermore, I give an argument why God's gender *cannot* be an image-relevant attribute, even if God is equally gendered or non-gendered. Because if God is gendered or nongendered and God's gender is image-relevant, then the people who have both genders or none, would be respectively greater and inferior image-bearers of God. Although in my proposal God can be metaphysically gendered, I argue that gender diversity beyond binaries, plus ethical issues with parenting metaphors, may favor a non-gendered language

for the God-talk—that the most metaphysically accurate language may not be the best language for God-talk.

So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them (Genesis 1:27, NIV).

فَإِذَا سَوَّيْتُهُ وَنَفَخْتُ فِيهِ مِنْ رُوحِي فَقَعُوا لَهُ سَاجِدِين (ص:٧٢)[1].

Introduction

In the biblical language[2] God is predominately referred to in masculine terms. This has induced some philosophical issues that also reflect an issue about religious practice. The philosophical/metaphysical question is whether God is metaphysically gendered or not. In religious practice, however, concern is that why should we relate to God as we relate to anyone with a specific strongly/weakly gendered attributes (e.g., father, king, strong)? In other words, once it comes to practice, relating to God as one relates to one's mother or nurturer might be preferable for one in comparison to relating to God as one relates to one's father or king. The way we (prefer to) relate to God, might also influence how we shape our religious identity. The question of how humans relate to God from a gendered perspective, impacts how religious identity is constructed.

The metaphysical question about God's gender challenges most of the Abrahamic traditional conceptions of God (Jewish, Christian, and Islamic). However, one might think that predominantly masculine references to God is more concerning for Christianity, at least when it comes to the religious practice. Since God, in Christianity is incarnated in a

[1] And when I have proportioned him and breathed into him of My [created] soul, then fall down to him in prostration. (Quran, Al-Hijr: Verse 29)
[2] By biblical language I am referring to Christian scriptures together with the Quran and other religious texts in Abrahamic tradition.

male body (Christ) and God and Christ are, in Christian faith, indeed a single reality, the doctrine of incarnation would probably give rise to the issue that why would God be more like one gender than any genders or none?[3] Or why would God be incarnated in one specific gender than any genders or none? However, this problem is not only an issue for the classic Christian faith. Rather, it is also translatable to the context of Jewish and Islamic faith, so as long as the language of all are often gendered.

The traditional language of Gold-talk, as pointed out thus far, has triggered different issues. These problems have prompted philosophers, theologians, and sociologists to investigate the explanations behind the predominantly masculine representation of God. Notably, a number of philosophers of religion have delved into the metaphysical underpinnings of the gendered terms. Could it be that the prevalent use of masculine terms when referring to God in traditional scriptures and texts is a reflection of a metaphysical masculinity? In this thesis I keep focused on the metaphysical explanation. This can be a constructive starting point for several reasons. First, it gets to the roots of the issue. If God is not metaphysically masculine, then the use of masculine terminology might be a human construction rather than divine truth. Second, the metaphysical perspective allows fresh

[3] Note that this problem is more related to the social aspect of the problem of God's gender, rather than the metaphysical problem. Because as Rea (2016, p. 9) pints out, the fact that Jesus of Nazareth (as one person of the trinity) was male does not necessarily imply that God is male and therefore masculine. Just as we would not ascribe *having a certain height* or *being bearded* to God, only because Jesus had a certain height or was bearded. This, however, would not block the question why God preferred to be incarnated as male and how is this related to the subordination of women in the Church. Also, we would see in the following that Rea argues that the fact that one person of the trinity is more like one gender is not enough to say that the trinity in whole is gendered. Moreover, according to traditional Christian views, Christ is one person with two natures: divine and human. This allows Christ to satisfy some predicates qua human and other (at least apparently) complementary predicates qua divine. One could claim Jesus is male as a human yet without sex or gender as divine. Since the latter remains true, despite the incarnation God stays without sex or gender.

theological reflection by liberating theology. If God has no intrinsic gender, new religious conceptualizations become possible without deviating from truth.

The primary purpose of this thesis is to develop a reconciliatory account that integrates the egalitarian concerns of feminism and the enduring traditional image of God that has been revered for millennia. As previously mentioned, the metaphysical approach examines potential metaphysical justifications for the use of predominantly masculine terms in traditional scriptures and texts when referred to God. Michael Rea (2016), in his metaphysical explanation, argues that God is either nongendered or equally gendered. I will delve deeper into his perspective. The reason I focus on Rea's account is that his view is also a reconciliatory account, and one of the most recently philosophically worked-out reactions to the problem. However, I argue that his account pays a high cost by compromising on the traditional metaphysics of God. I strive to find a balanced middle-ground where both perspectives (traditionalism and egalitarianism) are accommodated without as much cost. I propose that this metaphysical middle-ground is attainable through certain revisions to Rea's account.

In the following I will first provide a brief overview of the traditional approach to the issue. Then I will break the problem into two parts: metaphysical and socio linguistic. I will then present some of the arguments traditionalists have given to explain why the scriptures and texts portray a (masculine) gendered God. Next, I will also briefly highlight the counterarguments put forth by critics of traditionalism in response to each argument. After that, I will concentrate on a particular anti-traditionalism argument presented by Michael Rea (2016). Following this, I will raise an objection to Rea's account, arguing that while traditionalist might be correct in the sense that God *can* be gendered, they could be

mistaken in claiming that God's gender is image relevant. Once I stablished the *possibility* of God's gender being image-irrelevant, I will argue for the *necessity* of God's gender being image-irrelevant. This necessity can open a conceptual avenue to reconcile traditionalism with egalitarianism. Finally, I will distinct the most metaphysically accurate language for the God-talk from the best language for the God-talk and argue that even if a gendered language is metaphysically more accurate, it might not be the best language for the God-talk.

Traditionalism

Traditionalism holds that the pattern of characterizing God in primarily masculine gendered terms is theologically mandatory (Rea, 2016). Genderism holds that Gender is a divine attribute and it is not the case that God belongs equally to all genders (Ibid). Does anyone affirm genderism? It is often stated that the prevailing belief in Christian tradition is that God transcends gender. So, it is hard to say that traditionalism entails genderism. Indeed, as Rea points out, it is quite challenging to pinpoint theologians who support the idea of God having a gender. However, a more precise examination of the texts often cited as evidence for the consensus that God is genderless actually indicates that these texts only affirm the consensus that God is beyond physical sex rather than gender (Cooper 1998, pp.168-169).[4]

Even without clear theological affirmations of a gendered God, the history of religious iconography that portray God and each member of the Holy Trinity as

[4] See also Hook & Kimel, 2001.

predominantly male, attests to the fact that a masculine *depiction* of God has been the prevailing view throughout church history (Rea, 2016). While this does not necessarily indicate that the dominant theological *view* has been that God is inherently masculine, it does reflect a consistent pattern in how God has been represented. Robert Jenson (1992) maintains that there are no linguistic or metaphysical grounds to believe that Jesus' reference to God as 'Father' is metaphorical, and that during the Arian controversies of the fourth century, the Church concluded that this mode of address is both literal and absolutely preferable to feminine or neutral forms of address (ibid., p.105). Furthermore, Hook and Kimel write "At least as far as the grammar is concerned, the original hearers and readers of the Scriptures would have understood their God as no more and no less male than we English speakers do today when we read contemporary translations of the Scriptures or hear God spoken of as "he" from the pulpit." (Hook & Kimel, 2001, p.73) Hook and Kimel defend the view that God as portrayed in the Scriptures is a masculine gendered God. Additionally, about the depiction of God in the Old Testament, Mankowski (2001) argues that YHWH's fatherhood is the linchpin of his gender identification and marks him as definitively masculine.[5]

Michael Rea has objected to traditionalism that "it is not more accurate to characterize God as masculine rather than feminine" (Rea, 2016). Rea thinks that if God is unequally gendered, then we should compromise either our egalitarian intuitions about women and men as equal image-bearers of God or our belief in God as being a perfect being. I would argue that there is a way of conceiving God as being unequally gendered

[5] For extended discussion of masculine image of God in the Biblical language see: Frymer-Kensky (1999, pp. 187-89), Achtemeier (1992, pp. 1-16), Smith (1987, pp. 7-44), Frye (1998, pp. 17-43), Mankowski (1992, pp. 151-76), Arnold (1991, pp. 200-2015)

without compromising any of the following: traditionalism (as a historically respected way of thinking and referring to God for thousands of years), our egalitarian concerns, the image of God, and God as being perfect. In the following, before elaborating more on Rea's argument, I will introduce the two aspects, history, and importance of the problem.

Two Faces of the Problem: Sociolinguistic vs Metaphysical

The problem of God's gender might be framed in different ways with respect to different contexts. I think we should distinguish the sociolinguistic problem of God's gender from the metaphysical one. The socio-linguistic problem is about how social contexts in which the scriptures were relating to the immediate audience could be a decisive factor in the wording and development of the texts; and whether God's and people's gendered preferences can be compromised due to social contingent facts later when social norms alter or not.[6] How the traditional preference to refer to God in masculine terms has led to the subordination of women in the church is also related to this aspect of the problem.

The socio-linguistic problem needs socio-linguistic explanation. An instance of such explanation is the explanation from symbolic interactionism[7] according to which, as Carrothers puts it, "human beings engage in social action on the basis of meanings acquired from social sources, including their own experience. These meanings, which are communicated to others using symbols (especially spoken language), are both learned from others and to some extent shaped by those using the symbols. As humans learn and use symbols and develop meanings for objects in their environments, they develop a "mind"

[6] I will get back to this aspect of the problem at the end of this text.
[7] The most well-known theoreticians of symbolic interactionism are Cooley (1902), Blumer (1986), Burke (1980, 1991), McCall and Simmons (1978), Stryker (1980), Mead (1934), Goffman (1959, 1961, 1963), and Thomas and Thomas (1928).

that is both reflecting and reflexive. Humans are both actors and reactors, shaped and shapers, definers of social reality and defined by social reality. Thus, the human sense of "self" is product and process, as the self is simultaneously shaped by the larger society helping to shape that same entity" (Carrothers, 2003).

From the perspective of symbolic interactionism, in a patriarchal society, distribution of social roles interplays with gendered language and references. The manner in which we refer to individuals shapes their roles, and these roles, in turn, influence how we refer to them and interpret their roles. The meaning of an individual's role within society, and the roles society assigns to different individuals, affects their patterns of social engagement and experience. This echoes the idea that individuals are both participants and respondents, simultaneously shaped by society and shaping it.

When the concept of God is introduced into such a society, social sources begin to attach symbols to it. If God is initially defined as perfect and supreme power, society is likely to assign symbols to God that correspond with the source of power within that society: in a patriarchal context, a man. Once the supreme takes the masculine roles, this would impact women's social role and experience as well. Consequently, when the church comes into existence, women are introduced into it as those who do not bear the symbols of God to the same extent as men do, which affects their role within the church and relegates them to a subordinate status.[8]The sociolinguistic aspect of the problem is also related to traditional sociolinguistic norms interfering and conflicting with contemporary

[8] It is also notable that the translation of the scriptures can influence the conception of God in the destinated language and thereby social dynamics and role distributions and the meaning of the roles. See: Camus (2017). To see how translation might impact the image of God in a language see Mankowski (2001, p. 35). For instance, he writes in the Hebrew of Psalm 119 alone, there are 338 instances in which an explicitly masculine reference to God is necessarily neutralized in the English translation. (Ibid)

notions of gender norms. The predominance of masculine imagery and terminology for God in the Biblical texts reflects the influence of the ancient Israelite cultural milieu on early conceptions of the divine nature. As Israelite religion developed amidst a polytheistic environment dominated by male deities, this established an antecedent cultural bias towards perceiving the divine through the lens of masculinity.[9] God's depiction as a powerful warrior and king mirrored the hierarchical and patriarchal norms of Israelite society, while fatherhood and marital metaphors aligned with structures of authority in families and households.

Roland de Vaux, in his seminal 1958 (and 1960) work *Ancient Israel*, asserts that "there is no doubt that... the Israelite family is patriarchal," describing men as masters of their wives with absolute authority over their children, including at times the "power of life and death." Writing in 1960, anthropologist Raphael Patai likewise, in his study of the ancient Israelite family, points out the idea of patriarchy in and the role of the father as ruler of the family. This perspective is echoed in major biblical reference works of the period, including the 1976 *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* which refers to the "patriarchal family" ruled by paternal authority.[10] Likewise, the 1974 *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* describes the father's "almost unlimited authority" in the ancient Israelite family.[11] About the Israelite image of God, Hook and Kinel (2001, p.70) write "In the literary and narrative portrayal of divinity presented in the Scriptures, the gender of the God of Israel is unquestionably and unashamedly masculine. While it is true that grammatical gender does not necessarily indicate sexual identity, the correspondence

[9] See Green (2003, ch4) for the influence of Patriarchal Period of the conception of Yahweh.
[10] O. J. Baab, "Family," IDB 2:238, 240.
[11] Helmer Ringgren, "אָבh" TDOT 1:8.

in fully gendered languages between gender classification and the sex of personal beings is, we recall, broad, general and usual. More significantly, the principal titles, names and metaphors used to portray this God are also masculine. God is Father, King, Shepherd, Judge, Husband, Master."

The influence of sociological theory, notably Max Weber's seminal 1921 work *Economy and Society*, expanded use of the term patriarchy in biblical scholarship to connote society-wide male dominance. Weber's theories have heavily influenced the Hebrew Bible scholarship. Martin Noth's influential 1950 work *The History of Israel (Geschichte Israels)*, for instance, asserts that Israelite society was patriarchally ordered under the father's power (*patria potestas*). Subsequent studies such as Norman Gottwald's 1979 work, *Tribes of Yahweh*, characterize ancient Israelite society, culture, and semantics as being "pervasively patriarchal." Meyers (2014) underscores that many scholars continued to utilize patriarchal models to portray the ancient Israelite family, well into the late 20th and early 21st centuries. This trend is evident in works like Philip J. King and Lawrence E. Stager's *Life in Biblical Israel* (2001), and the 2003 *Dictionary of the Old Testament*, both of which affirm the dominance of paternal authority in an ancient Israelite family. Current biblical scholarship still retains hints of traditional patriarchal models through the continued use of terms like *paterfamilias*.

The default use of masculine pronouns and imagery for God in the Israelite society followed standard grammatical conventions rather than necessarily carrying theological import. God's covenantal relationship with Israel, framed in spousal terms with Yahweh as husband, also drew upon common customs surrounding marriage and kinship. Ideas regarding fertility from neighboring religious traditions further contributed to masculine

metaphors for God's generative and creative capacities (see Green 2003, p.257). The conceptual terrain was also shaped by the dominance of male priests and prophets, whose visions of the divine were expressed in masculine ideation. As discussed thus far, the gendered language used for God in the Old Testament was conditioned by the patriarchal and androcentric norms of ancient Israelite society, culture, and semantics. While this resulted in a predominance of masculine imagery, the diverse feminine metaphors for God resist narrowly gendered interpretations. This resistance is partially grounded in the scriptures as well. In the Biblical language God is also depicted in various feminine terms, including mother[12], mother hen[13], a woman in labor[14], nursing mother[15], having virtues like compassion[16], tenderness[17], care[18], love[19], in addition to having feminine beauty[20] and grace[21]. Thus, the cultural-linguistic influence on Biblical divine depiction in masculine terms might not be intended to exclude equally valid feminine attributes. However, the dominance of masculinity by the passage of time subordinated women and situated them in the church as the second gender, which finally induced some philosophical resistance against this dominance in the 20th century.

The feminist scholar Mary Daly famously proclaimed, "Fortunately, in our time, the problem can be described more directly and unequivocally: I would say that sexist conceptualizations, images, and attitudes concerning God, spawned in a patriarchal society,

[12] Isaiah 66:13
[13] Matthew 23:37 & Luke 13:34
[14] Isaiah 42:14
[15] Isaiah 49:15
[16] Hosea 11:3-4
[17] Isaiah 42:3
[18] Isaiah 49:15
[19] Isaiah 66:13
[20] Psalms 36:7
[21] Psalms 90:17

tend to breed more sexist ideas and attitudes, and together these function to legitimate and perpetuate sexist institutions and behavior. Briefly, if God is male, then the male is God" (Daly, 1985, p.38). She in her 1973 work adds “the biblical and popular image of God as a great patriarch in heaven, rewarding and punishing according to his mysterious and seemingly arbitrary will, has dominated the imagination of millions over thousands of years. The symbol of the Father God, spawned in the human imagination and sustained as plausible by pa-triarchy, has in turn rendered service to this type of society by making its mechanisms for the oppression of women appear right and fitting. If God in "his" heaven is a father ruling "his" people, then it is in the "nature" of things and according to divine plan and the order of the universe that society be male dominated. Fortunately, in our time, the problem can be described more directly and unequivocally: I would say that sexist conceptualizations, images, and attitudes concerning God, spawned in a patriarchal society, tend to breed more sexist ideas and attitudes, and together these function to legitimate and perpetuate sexist institutions and behavior. Briefly, if God is male, then the male is God. Within this context a mystification of role takes place: the husband dominating his wife represents God "himself."” (Daly, 1973). This critique encapsulates a key insight of second-wave feminist theology-- that predominantly masculine conceptions of God have helped justify the subordination of women within Christian tradition.[22] If God exemplifies masculinity, and masculinity holds privileged status, then women associated with femininity become secondary.[23]

[22] See Schussler (1983), Trible (1978), Johnson (1992)

[23] Another feminist camp called ecofeminism criticizes the environmental consequences of subordination of women which is partially caused by the masculine imagery of God. Ecofeminism argues that the patriarchal ideologies that justify subordination of women also drive a specific style of environmental exploitation. It suggests that in taking steps toward a more equitable and sustainable world, the dual liberation of women and nature is a necessary step. Changing the masculine metaphors by which we think and refer to the nature

In response, feminist theologians starting in the 1960s-1970s rigorously analyzed gendered God imagery. They distinguished biological sex from socio-cultural gender and drew on interdisciplinary insights to disentangle the two. Gradually, expanding theological conceptualizations of God beyond restrictive masculine norms became imperative for promoting egalitarian worldviews.[24] Although facing resistance, feminists increasingly succeeded in introducing plurality and inclusion into notions of the divine. They highlighted feminine aspects of God while recognizing that the sacred ultimately transcends human gender categorizations.[25] However, the belief that God transcends any categorization, including gendered, has been present in all the three major monotheistic traditions predating the 1960s, Christian feminists sought to highlight this view in order to resist against the perceived religious patriarchy.

Feminist theologians have employed diverse strategies to conceptualize God in ways that transcend masculinity. One approach as mentioned earlier, emphasizes feminine metaphors and imagery for the divine found implicitly in scripture and theology. Phyllis Trible (1978) and Elizabeth Johnson (1992, 1999, 2007) have highlighted God's maternal and amorous personae. Some propose new titles and pronouns, like "God/dess" and "Godself," (Ramshaw 1998, p.198-199) to avoid the limits of masculine nomenclature.[26]

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is a step to restructure human cognition of the nature and environment. From ecofeminism's perspective, a rethinking of religious narratives and symbolism, including the perception of the divine, is a potential pathway to challenge both gender and environmental injustices. See Adams (2007).

[24] Making this distinction per se does not entail that God is not gendered. Genderists may still hold the classic belief that God is beyond sex but is also gendered.

[25] See Christ (1998), Ruether (2005),

[26] As early as 1982, Sally McFague's "Metaphorical Theology" advocated moving beyond dominant male metaphors for God as king or father, highlighting feminine depictions like God as mother or lover that imply nurturing, empathetic qualities. Rosemary Radford Ruether's 1993 text "Sexism and God-Talk" contended that exclusively male pronouns and imagery for God have been employed to justify sexist structures, arguing mixed gender pronouns could help overcome such distortions. In her seminal 1992 work "She Who Is," Elizabeth Johnson provided an extensive analysis of the problems with predominantly masculine theological language and the necessity of balancing this imbalance with feminine and non-gendered speech about God.

Another tactic conceives God as equally encompassing both stereotypically masculine and feminine qualities, or reconceptualizes the Trinity to incorporate feminine persons alongside the traditional masculine ones.[27]

Rather than definitive gender traits, feminist scholars often associate God with non-gendered attributes including creativity, love, justice, and power. This shift focusses on qualities not limited by masculinity or femininity.[28] Many interpret ostensibly masculine God-language as symbolic rather than literal, recognizing it as a historical product of patriarchal cultures that should not constrain contemporary understandings. (McFague, Sallie, 1982; Pinnock et al, 1994; Ruether, 1993) Relatedly, some employ apophatic or negative theology that describes God by what God is not, avoiding restrictive attributions. (Turner, 1995) Also, highlighting female biblical figures and their visions of the divine provides further inspiration for inclusive theology. Although the scope need not be limited to Biblical figures. There is an abundance of historical figures beyond the Biblical narratives that can also be considered.

On the other hand, the metaphysical aspect of the problem of God's gender focuses on whether attributing gender to God in a literal sense is philosophically coherent or appropriate for a divine being who transcends finite categories. As previously mentioned, this metaphysical lens provides critical perspective, as issues in the socio-linguistic realm

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She noted titles integrating both genders like "God/dess" as one avenue for pluralizing the divine. Fundamentally, feminist theologians concur that challenging limited, authoritarian God-concepts perpetuated by male-only language is essential for promoting more egalitarian views of humanity and divinity alike.

[27] See Ramshaw (1995, 1996, 2000).

[28] One might object that we cannot scape society through language game alone and concepts like creativity, love, and justice might still carry with them gendered notions. While I agree that our engagement with and challenge of language norms still occur within a broader societal context, likely influenced by gendered norms, this doesn't render attempts to change the language game futile. It's unlikely that feminists view the shift in language as the only requisite for advancing an inclusive discourse about God.

may derive from deeper assumptions about gendered conceptions of the divine. in this thesis I will focus on this aspect of the problem of God's gender. Moreover, I will only focus on Michael Rea's argument in favor of the following thesis: "it is not more accurate to characterize God as masculine rather than feminine (or vice versa)". (Rea, 2016, p. 1) nevertheless, Ras's conclusion does not automatically entail that traditionalism is false. A traditionalist might accept that a gendered language is not the most metaphysically accurate language yet maintain consistently maintain that a gendered God-talk is theologically mandatory for some other reason.

Before delving into Rea's argument against the traditional genderist conception of God, in the following I will first present different arguments why one might believe that God is gendered. This would help to provide more context for Rea's argument. I will also outline some typical responses/counterarguments to these traditionalist arguments. Note that the following list of arguments is not exhaustive.

Why Traditionalism? An Overview and Analysis of the Arguments

Scriptural Argument

Traditionalists frequently appeal to scripture as warrant for persisting in predominantly masculine language for God. Specifically, Jesus' own pattern of addressing God as Father in the Gospels is upheld as a model that should be followed with the witnesses to him portraying God as the authorizer and authenticator of Jesus. As Köstenberger and Swain articulate, there are 136 instances of "pater," of which 120 have God as a referent. These references are pervasive across the discourses of John's Gospel,

suggesting that the 'Father' language is not just narrative dressing but central to the theological identity of Jesus as authorized and authenticated by God Himself (Köstenberger and Swain, 2008, p. 61-62).In addition to the Gospels, the New Testament overwhelmingly employs masculine titles like ‘Lord’ and masculine pronouns for God, which is taken as evidence that biblical language dictates God should be referred to with masculine terminology. Traditionalists also point to Old Testament imagery that depicts God in stereotypically masculine roles like king and warrior[29] as revealing the fundamentally masculine nature of God. The apostolic writings and the practices of the early church fathers further cement this tradition, where the masculine language used for God is seen not as a cultural artifact but as divine self-revelation. The scriptural authority, thus, mandates the use of masculine terms, viewing them as imbued with special revelatory significance.

The precedent of the apostles and early church fathers who utilized masculine language for God is likewise referenced as setting the standard that theology and tradition should follow. Divine inspiration of scripture indicates that the masculine language used stems from God's own chosen self-revelation rather than being culturally conditioned. As the supreme authority for Christians, scripture's sanction of masculine titles, metaphors, and pronouns for God is seen as mandating the predominantly masculine divine language. Calling God "Father" is elevated as a privileged title that reflects special revelation and should not be replaced with feminine alternatives.[30]

[29] King’ and ‘warrior’ are, respectively, strongly and weakly gendered attributes, according to Rea’s (2016) terminology.

[30] See Kimel, A. F., Jr. (1992) for more. Particularly look at Robert W. Jenson’s article in this book. In it, Jenson criticizes feminists who advocate for alternative terms to "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit," labeling them as "enemies of the church" and suggesting that their views border on heresy. Also see (Soskice, 2002, p. 142),

Overall, traditionalists commonly appeal to the model of Jesus, New Testament patterns, Old Testament metaphors, apostolic precedent, biblical inspiration and authority, and God's special fatherhood as scripturally justifying the continued use of predominantly masculine language for God. Feminine language is judged as lacking sufficient biblical warrant within this traditionalist interpretive framework.

Reply

Despite the prevalence of masculine imagery for God, there is no explicit biblical affirmation mandating the exclusive or predominant use of masculine language and pronouns in referring to the divine. Nowhere does the Bible teach that only masculine terms are appropriate for speaking about God. While God is routinely addressed with masculine titles like Father and Lord, this occurs alongside feminine metaphors such as God's maternal love depicted as that of a mother bird sheltering her children (Ruth 2:12) or Jesus likening himself to a mother hen gathering her chicks under her wings (Matthew 23:37).[31] Biblical texts attribute both stereotypically masculine qualities like power and stereotypically feminine qualities like nurturing compassion to God.

Furthermore, the linguistic context of ancient Israel shaped the imagery used by biblical authors, who wrote long before modern conceptions of gender emerged. As McGrath puts it,

> *Given the patriarchal society of Israel, the revelation of God naturally takes a patriarchal form. (We say "naturally" rather than "necessarily" because even in*

where he writes "the masculine terminology of the New Testament will be with us as long as the New Testament is with us."

[31] See also (Isaiah 66: 13)

patriarchal cultures female gods were known and worshipped.) It is not surprising, then, that God reveals himself to Israel as the "Father" of "his" people. Being disclosed as the Father of Israel, it is likewise natural that God should send one called a "son" who naturally assumes male humanity. Here an element of necessity does come into the picture; but it is a necessity of a secondary sort. It is due not to the essential, masculine nature of God but to the sexual polarity in which the Creator has given us our humanity. (McGrath, 2016: 208)

The biblical authors' prime concern was revealing salvation history, not prescribing divine titles or mandating masculine language. While deeply meaningful, the fatherhood of God is presented by Jesus in an inclusive, non-gendered sense according to most scholars (McGrath, ibid). As the variety of feminine and masculine metaphors for God across scripture demonstrates, reducing biblical language about God to gendered stereotypes fundamentally distorts the texts. In the absence of any clear biblical teaching limiting appropriate language for God to the masculine, the burden of proof lies with traditionalists to demonstrate otherwise.

The Psycho-Social Argument: Convenience

This argument goes as following:

Since exclusive use of masculine language is ingrained through centuries of tradition, using masculine pronouns and imagery when talking about God is simpler and easier than gender-neutral alternatives. Alternatives like repeatedly saying "God's self" or "God" instead of "he" are awkward and disruptive to conversation. People are used to and comfortable with male terms for God. Changing to more gender inclusive language is uncomfortable for those arguing from a traditionalist perspective. Consequently, mandated

gender-inclusive language imposes an inconvenient burden. God would not require us to bear unnecessary burdens in relating to Him.[32] Therefore, the convenience of prevailing masculine language for God shows that God intends for us to refer to Him with predominantly masculine terminology. Gender-inclusive language should not be theologically mandated since that would impose inconvenience.

Note that many people might be open to neutralizing the language we refer to God or making the worship language more inclusive; though disagree that neutralization is theologically mandatory.

Moreover, by changing the language of patriarchy, we run the danger of merely disguising, rather than eliminating, the deeply ingrained patterns we struggle against. We thus risk embedding misogynist discourse even more deeply into our metaphoric constructions, while at the same time removing the signals which could alert us to its presence. Changing the language does not necessarily remove the bias or the sexism that remains embedded in the thought patterns, images, and metaphors which, with language, combine to form a given text. Indeed, removing the language which signals sexist bias may result in obscuring that bias beyond conscious recognition, while allowing it to continue to quietly permeate our cultural subconscious. The masculine bias has not been removed; it has simply been rendered more subtle and therefore more dangerous, because more

[32] Indeed, some of the advocates of so-called convenience argument believe that gender-inclusive language might even be hard to put into songs in the church. "I have seen prayers and hymns that neutralize gendered pronouns, or supply the genitive "God's" for "His" — but they are almost impossible to sing, or to say aloud without stumbling, and sound like cold statements of belief, not prayers addressed to God… how might we introduce changes without tripping over our theological shoelaces, and without ending up with language that sounds clunky and awkward?" (Dawn, 2023). Note that Dawn argues against neutralizing the language, not against making it more inclusive. He asserts that "It takes effort, artistry, and perhaps some discomfort, but as Desmond Tutu said, we are a "rainbow people of God", and our language needs to reflect the richness of diversity, rather than the dullness of neutralization." (ibid)

difficult to discern and expose. When symbol, image, and metaphor are so deeply embedded in a text and culture as is the case with the Bible, perhaps it is time to recognize that we cannot easily eliminate the gendered biases which so often define the very essence of its thought and to set our energies rather to exposing those biases. Language is only a symptom of a more deeply ingrained problem; in changing the language alone, therefore, we run the risk of merely disguising the biases which are inherent in the text and its cultural stance. Unrecognized, and unrecognizable, those biases become even more insidious, even more powerful. This is particularly dangerous with a text such as the Bible which has played a foundational role in the formation of our own culture to the extent that its influence is so subtle and pervasive that it goes unrecognized in a culture that believes itself sophisticated and free of such influence. Rather than empowering gender bias by rendering it implicit, perhaps it is better to expose its hidden power, retaining the language which signals its presence and eliminating its force by bringing it into the light of critical and analytical discourse. (Innes-Parker, 1999)

Reply

I agree that altering deeply ingrained linguistic norms is indeed inconvenient. However, we should also consider the ethical implications of maintaining exclusive language. If the persistent use of masculine pronouns for God imposes a significant burden by perpetuating exclusionary perceptions or by reinforcing outdated gender biases, then the inconvenience of modifying our language is a justified and worthwhile endeavor. This adjustment aligns with a broader theological integrity that seeks to more inclusively reflect the divine nature in a way that resonates with contemporary understandings of gender and inclusivity. Therefore, while the transition may be challenging, it is compelled by a moral

imperative to foster a more welcoming and equitable religious discourse. Furthermore, the purported burden of reforming language conventions is temporary and diminishes with habitual use, whereas the marginalization of those excluded endures substantially longer (Cox & Jones, 2017; Crenshaw, 2013). This disparity in temporal impact is critical from a utilitarian ethical standpoint. The minor and temporary discomfort experienced by the privileged majority, who must adjust to new linguistic norms, is perhaps outweighed by the significant and long-lasting benefits that more inclusive language confers on marginalized groups. These groups often suffer from reduced participation in social and religious communities. Hence, revising language practices to be more inclusive is not only a matter of ethical urgency but also a corrective measure aligned with the principles of justice and equity. It is a necessary step towards remedying the systemic injustices that language can perpetuate.

Additionally, this argument assumes without justification that God would not require linguistic changes involving discomfort, when Scripture contains many examples of prophets championing reforms despite resistance. As Wolterstorff (1983) notes, God seems to permit discomfort in the pursuit of justice. Thus, appeals to convenience reflect human preference rather than divine authorization. The traditionalist argument fails to provide convincing theological grounds that convenience overrides pursuing truth, justice, and hospitality through inclusive language. Tradition and familiarity alone do not constitute sufficient warrants.

The Argument from Metaphors: Giving up the Metaphysical Commitment

Janet Martin Soskice has argued that Gendered pronouns have to do with "referring" to God rather than "defining" God. Talking about God is only possible when we invoke metaphors. (Soskice, 1985, p. 140) A more moderate form of traditionalism may abandon the metaphysical view of God as having gender, arguing instead that masculine or feminine terms used in biblical texts to refer to God are only metaphors and do not imply that God has an actual gender. This would not necessarily mean that using masculine terms for God is not theologically required. Traditionalists could maintain a weaker version of traditionalism by separating the metaphysical claim about God's masculinity from the theological mandate to use masculine language.[33] The argument that biblical gendered language for God is metaphorical is made in two main ways:

Apophaticism: Impossibility of the Best Theological Language

Some traditionalist theologians contend that referring to God using masculine pronouns and titles is warranted metaphysically, rather than being merely cultural or symbolic. They invoke apophatic theology, which holds that God transcends all human concepts and categories. From this perspective, all God-talk is ultimately metaphorical, since divine reality exceeds language. Therefore, masculine pronouns like "He" do not definitively describe God's gender but only refer to God indirectly through analogy and metaphor.

[33] For more about the metaphorical approaches see: McFague (1982), and Radford (1993)

This avoids definitive claims about God's masculinity, while still employing predominantly masculine language. Apophaticism is enlisted to permit masculine pronouns as metaphors pointing beyond themselves to divine mystery. Their intent is referring to rather than defining God. Masculine language is treated as authorized for metaphorical reference to God, without attributing biological sex or literal gender to the divine.

Advocates argue this upholds theological tradition without limiting God to masculine anthropomorphism. Critics counter that exclusionary language still shapes social conceptions of divine identity in harmful ways, despite apophatic cautions. Feminist theologians in particular argue that metaphor selection matters deeply, as these metaphors can reinforce or challenge societal structures of power and gender, even if God transcends all human categories (Johnson, 1992).

Reply

John Duns Scotus (1962) has defended the view that we can only properly understand God if we use words and concepts that bear the exact same meaning when applied to God as when applied to created beings. His core argument was straightforward: Unless language signifies the same thing for us as it does for God, we are left in total ignorance about who God is. However, both reason and divine revelation show that we can attain real knowledge of God. Reason demonstrates that complete skepticism is incoherent, since we would have to know something about God in order to claim that we can know nothing about Him. Scripture also presents itself as an objective revelation from God about His nature. Regarding analogy (metaphor), Duns Scotus argues that every analogy must contain a univocal or identical component, otherwise there would be no point of similarity between our knowledge of God and creatures. But if it is this univocal element that enables

our knowledge of the divine nature, then analogical knowledge is essentially reducible to univocal knowledge.

For those who argue that gendered language about God is metaphorical, a key issue arises: what is the common conceptual ground between gender attributes ascribed to God metaphorically and gender attributes ascribed to humans literally? In other words, when similar masculine or feminine descriptors are applied to God and humans, even if figuratively in the divine case, what precise univocal meaning connects the two usages?[34] Proponents of theological language as metaphor must clarify what the metaphor is based on - what aspect of "gender" conceptually carries over into metaphorical God-talk, given the assertions that divine gender is not equivalent to human gender. Any persuasive account of religious gender language as metaphorical requires delineating and defending this substantive connection at a conceptual level. In short, defenders of divine gender metaphors need to explicate: what is the core conceptual link between theological and anthropological uses of gender language that makes such metaphorical predication coherent and meaningful?[35]

[34] The advocates might insist that we accept that there must be hypothetical univocal content, though we don't know what that content is and indeed that is where the mystery occurs.

[35] One could argue that some masculine imagery for God serves as metaphors indicating genuine realities, while also rejecting the idea that the masculine aspects of these metaphors point to genuine analogies. For example, one might describe God as a King to emphasize God's supreme authority, without implying that the masculine aspect of kingship, as opposed to queenship, points to anything at all (Than to Kenneth Boyce for this comment). While this approach may work for certain metaphorical representations of God, applying it to other metaphors could render the terms relatively meaningless. For instance, describing God as a King to emphasize authority is straightforward, but referring to God as a Bridegroom (Isaiah 62:5; Hosea 2:19-20; Matthew 9:15; Revelation 19:7) to illustrate a covenantal relationship with the Church could become hollow if we disregard the cultural and relational connotations embedded in the metaphor. Such an approach might risk oversimplifying complex theological concepts and diminishing the richness and depth of the metaphors used to convey God's nature and relationship with humanity.

Finally, some feminist theologians have also appropriated apophatic theology to advance their arguments, suggesting that the ineffability of God supports the case against using exclusively masculine pronouns and imagery, thereby promoting a more inclusive approach to divine representation (Johnson, 1992; McFague,1987).

In the following I present the second argument as why some theologians believe biblical gendered language for God is metaphorical.

From Metaphysical Monism to Linguistic pluralism

Aquinas believed we use different metaphorical predicates for talking about a single subject. (Aquinas 1947, 165). Aquinas' observation about utilizing multiple metaphors in reference to a single subject is enlisted by some traditionalists to justify persisted use of masculine language for God alongside feminine metaphors. From this Thomistic perspective, masculine terms like 'Father' or 'Lord' do not definitively circumscribe God but rather provide partial metaphors illuminating the divine reality analogically. Since all language for God is imperfect, a diversity of metaphors expands apprehension of the divine mystery. (McFague, 1987, 1982)

Traditionalists argue masculine pronouns and titles ought not be rejected solely based on their partiality and potential distortions. Rather, embracing syntactic and semantic pluralism allows masculine and feminine metaphors to complement one another in gesture toward the inexhaustible God. Just as Scripture contains myriad names and images for God, theological discourse should incorporate this metaphorical multiplicity. From this vantage,

persisting in certain masculine divine metaphors upholds legitimate linguistic pluralism, rather than mandating exclusivity.[36]

Reply

While Aquinas' theory of metaphorical predication provides a thoughtful framework for conceptualizing plurality of divine imagery, critics contend this perspective insufficiently engages the social and political dimensions of theological language (McFague 1982 & Johnson 1992). A hermeneutics of suspicion reveals that purportedly equivalent metaphors functionally occupy asymmetrical positions shaped by dominant traditions. From a critical theories of postmodernity lens, the claim of theoretical parity ignores how God-talk accrues social meaning within matrices of power.[37] This oversight suggests a deeper issue: the ostensible neutrality of linguistic pluralism masks the marginalizing impact of masculine predominance in religious language. it is crucial to recognize that language is not merely descriptive but also constitutive.

The presupposed neutrality of Aquinas' linguistic pluralism belies the marginalizing force of masculine predominance. Performative theories of language (Butler,1990) illuminate how repetitive God-he tropes enact gendered connotations, despite apophatic qualifications. Consequently, while important, metaphor theory alone cannot redeem problematic exclusionary effects within particular embodied social contexts. The practical implications of these metaphors extend beyond theoretical theological debate and have tangible effects on the inclusion and representation of gender identities in religious practice.

[36] See: Rogers (2002).
[37] See Dickens & Fontana (2015)

In the following I present a new response to traditionalism, proposed by Michael Rea (2016). Reas's view will be the central focus of the reminder of this thesis.

A response to Traditionalism/ Genderism: Michel Rea Argues

In his article "Gender as a divine attribute", Michael Rea aims to undermine theologically mandatory characterizations of God as predominantly masculine. A core motivation underlying Rea's analysis is to defend an account of divine gender that enables more gender-inclusive theological language. Rea notes that the predominant use of masculine terminology for God has posed significant and persisting obstacles to faith and full participation in religious communities for many people. Given these obstacles, Rea sees strong theological warrant for metaphysical conceptions of God that allow for feminine and gender-neutral modes of divine representation. His sympathy towards feminist concerns leads Rea to develop an understanding of divine attributes that challenges mandatory masculine depictions of God. In this way, Rea's argument is driven by a desire to remove barriers to faith and religious life that exclusive use of masculine language has erected (Schussler, 1983; Trible, 1978; Johnson, 1992). Moving to more inclusive theological language, he suggests, can help restore access to the divine for those alienated by the traditional gendering of God.

Rea's argument rests primarily on an analysis of gender as a potential divine attribute, leveraging the *imago Dei* doctrine and the method of perfect being theology. Rea concludes that masculine depictions of God are no more accurate than feminine ones. While he takes himself indirectly to be addressing the question whether we are rationally

required to characterize God in predominantly masculine terms, he argues that "masculine characterizations of God are no more or less accurate than feminine ones." (Rea, 2016, p. 4) This challenges theological justifications for mandatory masculine language about God. His account principally rests on a set of principles that will be pointed out explicitly in the following:

> **Doctrine of Perfect Being (DPB):** God possesses all perfections to the highest degree.

Rea's central thesis is that God is not most accurately characterized as masculine, nor as feminine. This conclusion is reached through the following premises: first, God would only be most accurately characterized as masculine if God were masculine but not equally feminine. Second, God is masculine or feminine only if God is equally masculine and feminine. Thus, characterizing God as exclusively masculine cannot be most accurate. I call this argument *the main argument*.

In defending the second premise, Rea argues against "genderism", defined as the view that God possesses a gender that is either predominantly masculine or feminine. For clarity, it's important to note that Rea discusses gender as if it were binary for simplicity of expression/argumentation, without committing to this assumption as a personal belief. This simplification allows for structured debate, but Rea acknowledges that individuals might exhibit traits typically associated with the opposite gender, thus challenging stereotypical gender roles. His argument involves categorizing potential divine attributes as either essential or contingent, and intrinsic or extrinsic. Rea contends strongly gendered

attributes[38] could only be essential if each person of the Trinity equally exhibited that gender, otherwise the *imago Dei* doctrine would be compromised. Likewise, he holds that contingent divine attributes would conflict with God's nature and portrayal in Scripture. Therefore, Rea concludes that genderism is false; God transcends gender categories. As mentioned, Rea's argument relies on the *Imago Dei* Doctrine:

> **The *Imago Dei* Doctrine (IDD):** we are created in the image of God (humans uniquely reflect God's nature and attributes).[39]

The *imago Dei* doctrine implies humans share the image of God, regardless of their gender. The point that women and men alike bear God's image, plays a pivotal role here. Rea utilizes it, in addition to a few other principles, to undermine any divine asymmetry between masculinity and femininity. Since the doctrine, in Rea's eyes, implies both genders reflect God's nature *equally*, Rea contends it provides grounds for denying any essential or intrinsic divine gendering. Otherwise, IDD would be compromised- which is a great cost to pay for rescuing traditionalism. Thereby IDD, alongside metaphysical analysis, allows Rea to deny genderism and defend his thesis that God transcends gender.

In conclusion, Rea leverages theology and metaphysics to argue against mandatory masculine depictions of God. His view avoids contentious divine transcendence or anti-realism, instead resting on the more widely accepted *imago Dei* doctrine. Thereby Rea provides a novel theological grounding for gender-inclusive language about God.

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[38] "Strongly gendered" terms refer to those attributes that are typically considered to pertain exclusively to one gender.

[39] Genesis 1:27, which reads: "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female he created them."

One might ask why would IDD be compromised, if God were essentially or purely masculine or feminine? By stating that IDD would be "compromised" if God were essentially or purely masculine or feminine, Rea means that such a view of God's gender attributes would undermine or be in conflict with the key theological teaching that both men and women *equally* bear the image of God. However, IDD (inspired from Genesis 1:27) does not necessarily indicate that men and women *equally* bear the image of God. The view that image-bearing entails equivalent divine representation in both men and women could be considered an egalitarian interpretation of IDD. However, it is also plausible to read Genesis 1:27 in a non-egalitarian way that does not assume identical manifestation of the divine image across male and female humanity. The biblical text alone does not definitively support absolute parity in how the *Imago Dei* is manifested between genders. Asserting IDD necessitates equivalent expression in men and women reflects a particular exegetical stance that goes beyond the Genesis passage's literal wording. In short, while equality of divine image-bearing can reasonably be read into Genesis 1:27 through an egalitarian lens, such equality cannot be definitively proven from this passage alone when interpreted in isolation from other theological assumptions. Thus, Rea's reading of IDD has egalitarianism built into it. An egalitarian point of view about gender is of great importance in Rea's account. This could be put in the following way:

> **Doctrine of Equality (DE):** both men and women equally reflect God's nature and bear God's image.

Rea takes IDD to directly imply a fundamental theological equality between women and men as image-bearers of God. However, the basic concept of IDD as expressed in Genesis 1 does not explicitly mention gender equality. This allows for multiple interpretations.

Exegetically and historically, the ideas likely emerged separately rather than egalitarianism being "baked into" the imago Dei originally. So, it may be preferable to conceptually distinguish IDD from an egalitarian reading of this doctrine (DE). Prima facie, IDD as expressed in scripture does not necessitate an egalitarian interpretation. Egalitarianism represents an additional theological perspective that can be brought to bear when exegeting the biblical concept of humanity made in God's image. While IDD ascribes unique representative status to humans, egalitarian readings further emphasize the equal worth, dignity and value of all people regardless of gender. Thus, IDD establishes human status as God's image-bearers, while egalitarianism specifically foregrounds the fundamental equality of women and men that this status entails. Separating these two aspects allows us to appreciate how each theological locus respectively contributes to a doctrine of humanity.

Rea's main line of reasoning is:

1- The *imago Dei* doctrine [plus DE] affirms that both men and women equally reflect God's nature and bear His image.

2- If God were inherently and exclusively masculine (or feminine), then men (or women) would reflect God's image to a greater degree than women (or men).

Therefore, an essentially masculine (or feminine) God would imply men (or women) are superior image-bearers.

But this conclusion contradicts the *imago Dei* teaching of equal status and value for both genders. In this sense, an essentially gendered God would "compromise" or undermine a core theological doctrine about humanity being (equally) made in God's image. It would create a theological inconsistency. Rea sees this as problematic because the *imago Dei* doctrine is well-established in scripture and Christian tradition. Thus, he

argues God cannot be inherently masculine or feminine, as this would compromise both God's perfection (DPB) and a cherished teaching about human dignity (DE).

In short, Rea believes positing an essentially gendered God would make it impossible to consistently uphold DE. It would call into question a major theological anthropological teaching.

In the remaining of this text, I will focus on the following extended reconstruction of Rea's argument.

The Imago Dei Argument

Before presenting the Imago Dei Argument, it's crucial to define the terminology used throughout the analysis, particularly regarding the concept of "strongly gendered" attributes. In the context of this argument, "strongly gendered" terms refer to those attributes that are typically considered to pertain exclusively to one gender. For example, the term 'king' might be seen as applicable specifically to males under traditional gender connotations. On the other hand, "weakly gendered" terms, such as 'strong' and 'nurturing', may be associated with one gender but are not exclusive to that gender and can apply across genders. Rea also defines several key positions:

Traditionalism: The belief that characterizing God primarily in masculine terms is theologically necessary.

Genderism: The view that God possesses a specific gender, not equally shared across genders.

His argument against traditionalism goes as the following:

> P1. Strongly gendered attributes are among God's essential attributes only if God belongs equally to each gender.
>
> P2. God has no contingent intrinsic divine attributes.
>
> P3. Strongly gendered attributes are among God's extrinsic contingent attributes only if God belongs equally to each gender.
>
> P4. If God has any strongly gendered attributes, they are among God's essential attributes, God's contingent intrinsic attributes, or God's extrinsic contingent attributes.
>
> C1. So, either God does not have any strongly gendered attributes or God belongs equally to each gender.
>
> P5. If God does not have any strongly gendered attributes, then God has no gender.
>
> C2. So, either God has no gender or God belongs equally to each gender.
>
> P6. If God has no gender or God belongs equally to each gender, then God is not most accurately described as masculine gendered.
>
> P7.) If God is not most accurately described as masculine gendered, traditionalism is false.
>
> C3. So, traditionalism is false.[40]

In the following I will raise an objection to Rea's account and attempt to offer an alternative solution that upholds God's perfection, the *imago Dei* doctrine (IDD), doctrine of equality (DE), and traditionalism. My goal is to critique Rea's position and present a new perspective that does not compromise on the commitments to God's maximal excellence, humanity bearing the *imago Dei*, equality between the genders, and continuity with historical theological conceptions. I aim to articulate a position that coherently affirms the importance of these four key principles without sacrificing any of their integral values for

[40] Special thanks to Kenneth Boyce for his reconstruction of Rea's argument.

theology. The objection and alternative proposal to follow will be an exercise in constructive theological synthesis that integrates scriptural, philosophical, and feminist insights without forcing an either-or choice between integral doctrines and values.

An Objection to Rea's Image of the Image of God: A New Resolution

The core idea behind IDD is that humanity is created in the image and likeness of God - we reflect divine attributes in our own nature. This means there is a fragment of the divine within each human being; we embody a humanized manifestation of godly qualities.[41] Humans represent and mirror God, exemplifying some central aspects of the divine nature. However, IDD does not entail that all divine attributes are reflected in humanity. Also, it does not mean that all our ascriptions are godly ascriptions. Most understandings of IDD focus on human reflection of God's intellectual, spiritual, and moral facets. IDD does not require total reflection between human and divine ascriptions. Rather, humans in a limited way embody a subset of godly attributes essential to the image of God. While some Christians extend the image to incorporate physical and other non-physical divine attributes, IDD still does not imply the image fully encapsulates every divine ascription. Therefore, IDD allows that some divine ascriptions are image-relevant, while others extend beyond the human reflection of God's likeness.

Once we accept that not all ascriptions of God are image-relevant, there would be *gap* between the antecedent and consequent of the following conditional statement:

[41] There is significant discussion among theologians and Biblical scholars regarding whether the doctrine of imago Dei implies that humans possess attributes similar to those of God. Ontic interpretations support this similarity, while functional interpretations diverge, suggesting that to bear the imago Dei is merely to fulfill a specific role or function. Here my understanding is that Rea's view is easier to make sense when an ontic interpretation is assumed.

The Gappy Conditional: If gender is a divine attribute, then it has to be image relevant.

The issue is that the antecedent proposes gender as a divine attribute, but the consequent does not necessarily follow according to IDD. Since some divine attributes extend beyond the image-relevant subset embodied by humans, gender could hypothetically qualify as a divine ascription while not being part of humanity bearing the *Imago Dei*. *Omnipotence*, *omniscience*, *omnibenevolence* are essential intrinsic attributes of God that may not be part of the image. Also, *creatorship*, *Omnipresence in relation to creation*, and *mercifulness to the creation* are essential extrinsic attributes that may not be image relevant. Moreover, *self-limitation in relating to creation* and *incarnation in a specific human* are related to contingent extrinsic properties that are not image relevant as well.

On the other hand, we humans have properties that do not share with God and, thus, are not part of the divine image. For instance, in order to hold that persons with disabilities are equally image-bearers of God as those without, we must recognize that abilities or disabilities do not define one's likeness to God. Were this not the case, it would suggest a hierarchy among image-bearers, thereby contradicting God's justice and perfection. This perspective aligns with a broader theological inquiry into the nature of the imago Dei, which asserts that God's essence is reflected in the moral and spiritual capacities of humanity rather than physical attributes or abilities. However, considering mental disabilities, it is important to recognize that the imago Dei encompasses all individuals regardless of their cognitive abilities. The essence of the divine image is not compromised by mental disabilities, as it is not contingent on intellectual or cognitive capacities alone.

Instead, it is reflected in the inherent dignity, relationality, and capacity for love and moral discernment that all humans possess. This view avoids ableism by affirming that every person, regardless of physical or mental abilities, fully bears the image of God. It underscores that the imago Dei is not diminished by any human limitation but is universally present in all aspects of human existence, emphasizing relational and spiritual dimensions over specific capacities.

Thus, there are both divine properties that are not relevant to the imago Dei and human properties that do not pertain to this divine image. Once we accept that God has attributes not reflected in the *Imago Dei*, there is no guarantee a putative divine gender attribute would be image-relevant to humans. Also, once we accept that humans have attributes not reflected in the *Imago Dei,* there is no guarantee a putative human gender attribute would be image relevant. The gappy conditional fails because the consequent does not always follow from the antecedent - divine gender may or may not be image relevant. There is no necessity entailed between a divine attribute of gender and its manifesting in the *imago Dei* (the *gap*). The two are *possibly* disconnected given the *gap* between the full scope of divine ascriptions and those constituting image-relevance.

The gappy conditional is central to Rea's argument that divine gender attributes would undermine either DE (thereby God's perfection) or IDD. Rea takes it for granted that if God has gender qualities, it must be reflected in the *imago Dei* to align with the gappy conditional. This would conflict with DE and perfection by making God's gender image-relevant for humans. Simply because those who bear the image of God, would be greater image-bearers.

However, as discussed previously, the gappy conditional is problematic - there is no necessity entailed between divine gender and image-relevance. Therefore, the gappy conditional cannot reliably connect God's gender to undermining DE or DPB. Rea's case depends on the gappy conditional bridging divine gender and image reflection to generate his critique. But the *gap* acknowledged in IDD severs this connection. Divine gender attributes need not be imaged-relevant for humanity. So, the gappy conditional cannot be a plausible foundation to show God's gender undercuts DPB or IDD, since image reflection does not necessarily follow.

All in all, the gappy conditional is the unestablished bridge at the heart of Rea's case against gendered conceptions of God. But in fact, the *gap* within the gappy conditional prevents it from linking divine gender to imperfection or gender inequality in the *Imago Dei*. Rea does not seem to provide any good reason to bridge the *gap*. Without justification for closing the *gap* in the gappy conditional, there is no basis to necessitate divine gender attributes being *imago Dei* relevant for humanity. Absent a compelling reason to link God's gender to image reflection, we cannot presume divine gender characteristics must contribute to the *imago Dei* in humans.

Rather, it is entirely plausible under the *imago Dei* doctrine that God could have a gender, yet that gender may not factor into the divine image borne by humankind. The *gap* between the full scope of God's attributes and those constituting image-relevance allows for divine gender that does not shape humanity as God's image.

In short, I'm arguing that there is conceptual room for God to have gender while concurrently that gender remains disconnected from and non-determinative for the *imago Dei*. The burden of reason is now on Rea. Unless the *gap* in the gappy conditional can be

persuasively bridged, we cannot foreclose the possibility of divine gender attributes that do not carry over to the formation of human beings as image-bearers. So, God's embodiment of gender and humanity's embodiment of the *imago Dei* may complementarily cohere. Affirming the *gap* may unlock conceptual reconciliation. The *gap* would also let us spell out IDD more accurately.

IDD*: we are created in the image-relevant ascriptions of God.

Upholding the gap in the gappy conditional opens up a new potential avenue for reconciling traditional theology and modern egalitarian concerns. So, for now, I argue the *gap* should be upheld, allowing theology to accommodate both divine gender and a non-gendered understanding of the *imago Dei*. The two ideas need not conflict given the possibility of non-image-relevant divine gender.

In the absence of a good reason to bridge the *gap* and stablish why if gender is divine attribute, then it also has to be an image-relevant attribute, I would argue that it is entirely plausible that God could embody a specific gender, while concurrently, that gender does not contribute to the formation of the divine image. By affirming the *gap* rather than conflating divine attributes with image attributes, we find a way to cohere traditional gendered God-talk with modern egalitarian sensibilities. God's gender needs not impose inequality regarding the *imago Dei*.

To sum up, a novel promising possibility emerges if we do not force divine gender to shape the *imago Dei*, given they can remain distinct. This integrative approach enables concurrently upholding the richness of traditional theology, divine perfection, *imago Dei* dignity, and gender egalitarian values.

Now that the existence of the *gap* is giving us a possibility to address our egalitarian concerns without compromising on traditionalism, and that Rea's reason as why gender cannot be a divine attribute is neutralized, let's see to which category of attribute(s) gender might belong. I assume that Rea is right that gender is neither an essential intrinsic nor an essential extrinsic attribute of God. Moreover, I accept that gender is not a contingent intrinsic attribute of God. I focus on his argument against gender being an extrinsic contingent attribute. In other words, I am targeting P3 of the *imago Dei* argument.

Gender as a Contingent Intrinsic/ Extrinsic Attribute

Let's suppose that Rea is right and being masculine or feminine cannot be an essential intrinsic/ extrinsic attribute of God. What about it being a contingent intrinsic/ extrinsic attribute of God? I accept from Rea that the set of contingent intrinsic attributes is empty. But cannot gender be a contingent extrinsic attribute instead? Premise 3 of the *imago Dei* argument is to block this possibility. Rea defends this premise in the following way:

> (1) God is extrinsically more masculine gendered than feminine gendered (or vice-versa) only if this fact about God is more grounded in God's external behaviors or ways of relating to people.
>
> (2) God's external behaviors and ways of relating to people fail to ground the fact that God is more masculine gendered than feminine gendered or vice-versa [supported both by the equality thesis and various other aspects of the Christian Scriptures and tradition].
>
> So, it is not the case that God is extrinsically more masculine gendered than feminine gendered (or vice-versa).

In defense of the premise (2) Rea writes

> "[t]*o say that God belongs to both genders, however, is not yet to say that God belong equally to both genders. Perhaps God belongs to both genders but nevertheless has a preponderance of masculine attributes and therefore counts as more masculine than feminine. As noted earlier, however, to say this is to fall afoul of the equality thesis. Again: If every person of the trinity were more masculine than feminine, or if the divine nature were more masculine than feminine, or if the trinity as a whole were more masculine than feminine, then men as such would be greater image-bearers than women as such, contrary to the equality thesis*" (Rea 2016, p:13)

Here Rea's position again relies on the problematic gappy conditional - if divine gender is extrinsic, it must be *imago Dei* relevant, contradicting DE. However, as I have previously argued, not all divine attributes, whether contingent or essential, are necessarily image relevant. Consequently, God might possess masculinity or femininity as a contingent extrinsic attribute, without it being relevant to the divine image.

So far, I have argued why God *might* be gendered, given the possibility of gender being an image-irrelevant property. Note that I am not offering any argument against the view that the traditional pattern is theologically optional (feminism) and thereby the traditional pattern of characterizing God in predominantly masculine terms is theologically mandatory (traditionalism). Rather I am arguing that a perfect God can possibly have a gender (not necessarily male) and nonetheless humans are equal image-bearers of that

perfect God. But the *gap* that I established can give a conceptual room for traditionalism to sneak in. In the following I will go further than just saying that gender *might* be image-irrelevant, and I will argue that gender *cannot* be an image-relevant attribute. However, this would block the version of traditionalism that holds God is gendered and gender is image-relevant, a weaker version of traditionalism that holds God is gendered but gender is not image-relevant can be rescued from Rea's objections. This version of traditionalism is reconcilable to IDD, DPB, and DE.

Objection

One significant objection to the thesis that gender is not an image relevant property of God arises from the textual evidence of Genesis 1:27, which states: "So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them." This passage ostensibly links the divine image explicitly with gender differentiation, thereby suggesting that gender is not merely incidental but fundamentally constitutive of the imago Dei. Advocate of this interpretation may argue that the explicit mention of 'male and female' underpins a theological anthropology where gender is a divinely inscribed characteristic, reflecting essential attributes of the divine nature itself. This objection posits that to be created in God's image, as described in the foundational Biblical text, inherently involves gender distinctions that mirror divine properties, thus rendering gender an indispensable aspect of human resemblance to God.[42]

[42] Thanks to Marta Heckel for rising this point.

Reply

As previously elucidated in the context of ancient Israelite society, the language employed in the Bible is attuned to the particular social conditions of its initial recipients. This observation suggests that the depiction of God in scriptural texts does not necessarily reflect divine attributes but is rather a strategic accommodation to the linguistic and cultural horizons of the audience. Irrespective of God's inherent attributes, the divine communication is tailored to ensure that it is comprehensible to human recipients. This adaptation can be analogized to an adult walking with a young child: even if the adult is capable of much faster speeds, they moderate their pace to align with the child's capabilities. The adult's choice to walk slowly does not reflect their usual pace or capability, but rather an accommodation to the child's limited speed. This methodological adjustment ensures that the divine message is accessible and meaningful to its audience.

However, it is important to note that the phrase "male and female he created them" in Genesis 1:27 can be interpreted as highlighting the comprehensive nature of humanity in bearing God's image rather than specifying gender as a divine attribute. The mention of "male and female" emphasizes the inclusivity and totality of human beings created in God's image, encompassing all of humanity without elevating gender as a primary attribute of the divine nature. This perspective aligns with a broader theological understanding that the imago Dei refers to qualities such as relationality, moral capacity, and spiritual nature, which are shared by all humans regardless of gender. Therefore, while the text explicitly mentions gender, it does so to stress the completeness of humanity's reflection of God's image, rather than to denote gender itself as a fundamental characteristic of the divine nature. This interpretation allows for a nuanced understanding that respects the textual

evidence while maintaining that gender is not an indispensable aspect of the imago Dei. After all, given that the matter under consideration is profoundly metaphysical in nature, relying solely on textual arguments may not be the most effective method to counter opposing views.

The Magnitude of Human Diversity[43]

In this section, I will connect Rea's argument to an objection I term the Objection from Human Diversity. Briefly stated, the Objection from Human Diversity cites the thesis of Human Diversity (HD) which basically says humanity exhibits diversity in gender identity and expression.

> **HD**: Some individuals identify as men, others as women, some reject gender categorization altogether, and still others adopt a fluidity or spectrum of gender identification.

Let's also take another look at C2 of the *imago Dei* argument:

> **C2**. So, either God has no gender or God belongs equally to each gender.

Let's break this disjunctive proposition into two propositions:

> **C2.1**: God has no gender.
>
> **C2.2**: God belongs equally to each gender.[44]

[43] I express my gratitude to Argon Gruber for our engaging discussions and his beneficial ideas.
[44] Surely it is not possible for both C2.1 and C2.2 to be true or false. at most one is false/true.

For argumentative simplicity, let's stipulate the Gender Relevance Thesis (GRT) as the following:

GRT: Gender constitutes an *imago Dei* relevant attribute.[45]

The argument proceeds thus:

Part#1

1- (HD C2.1, and GRT) are all true.

2- If (HD, C2.1, and GRT) are all true, then men/women would be superior image-bearers compared to gender fluid individuals, yet inferior to agender individuals.

3- If men/women would be superior image-bearers compared to gender fluid individuals, yet inferior to agender individuals, then ED is false.

4- But ED is not false.

5- Therefore, (HD, C2.1, and GRT) are NOT all true.

Part#2

1*: (HD, C2.2, and GRT) are all true.

2*: If (HD, C2.2, and GRT) are all true, then men/women would be superior image-bearers compared to agender individuals, yet inferior to gender fluid individuals.

[45] One reason to think that God's gender is image-relevant is that, intuitively, gender is intimately connected with human personality traits, and it shapes a person's general way of being in the world and relating to others. It is plausible to think that things this intimately connected to the human condition would be relevant to the divine image. (Rea, personal correspondence)

3*: If men/women would be superior image-bearers compared to agender individuals, yet inferior to gender fluid individuals, then ED is false.

4*: But ED is not false.

5*: Therefore, (HD1, C2.2, and GRT) are NOT all true.

From part#1 and part#2 we learn that switching from C2.1 to C2.2 (which is basically the opposite of C2.1) does not change the truth value of the conjunction. Therefore, one of the other conjuncts has to be false. HD seems to be plausible. The only remaining option is GRT. So, GRT is what makes the conjunct false. In other words, it is not the case that gender constitutes an *imago Dei* relevant attribute.

Rea argues that God must lack gender or encompass all genders, because singular masculinity/femininity would conflict with equal *imago Dei* status across humanity. However, Rea overlooking human gender diversity undermines this stance. Per HD, some individuals are agender while others exhibit gender fluidity. If divine-human gender matching signifies *imago Dei* relevance (GRT), those individuals would image God to lesser/greater degrees, violating DE. Thus, Rea's premises implicitly deny HD's attestation of multifaceted human gender identities, generating internal tension regarding DE and GRT.

If divine gender lacks *imago Dei* relevance, how would God possessing gender inherently contradict egalitarian ideals? The *gap*, along with the present argument, reveals conceptual space to concurrently uphold traditional divine gender attributions, DE, IDD*, and DPB. Affirming non-imagic gender loosens presumed clashes between these commitments, facilitating systematic reconciliation.

Ironically, my conclusion undermining GRT may inadvertently reinforce traditionalism and genderism, contrary to Rea's aims. While sharing Rea's opposition to such views on substantive grounds, dispelling GRT technically removes DE as an obstacle for traditional masculine depictions of God. With *imago Dei* disconnected from gender, theologically attributing masculinity to God no longer threatens DE or modern egalitarian morals.

Thus, dismissing GRT may unexpectedly ease conflicts between traditional divine gender attribution and egalitarian values, despite reservations regarding the former on principled grounds. Ultimately, separating divine gender from human imaging affirms that all humans equally bear God's image irrespective of potentially gendered divine attributes or identity. So, these results, while counterintuitive, may help deescalate debates by affirming shared human dignity regardless of disparate perspectives on intrinsically gendered divinity.

Rea's error was that, when he assumed for the sake of simplicity that gender is binary, he overlooked the fact that gender's being binary does *not* entail that the gender binary is exclusive or exhaustive. Even if there are only two genders available for people to be, that does not mean every person is one or the other gender in the sense that some might be both. It also doesn't mean that every person is one or the other in the sense that some might be neither. The important moral takeaway from all this is that it is crucially important to be cognizant of marginalized communities.

Finally, one might query how I would reconcile the application of strongly feminine terms to God by theologians such as Julian of Norwich. My response would be that God could potentially be gendered unequally, and in such cases, the use of these terms would

be coherent. As Rea articulates, **"**[t]o say that God belongs to both genders, however, is not yet to say that God belongs *equally* to both genders. Perhaps God belongs to both genders but nevertheless has a preponderance of masculine attributes and therefore counts as *more masculine than feminine*. As noted earlier, however, to say this is to fall afoul of the equality thesis.**"** As I have posited, I do not need to compromise on ED if I accept the potentiality of God being unequally gendered. For God might be gendered without the unequal distribution of gendered attributes being pertinent to the divine image. After all, I admit that even with these conditions, the perception that God possesses a masculine identity could inadvertently suggest that men are more closely aligned with the divine than women. Human nature, with its tendencies towards bias and stereotype, might then allow this perception to subtly, perhaps inevitably, influence community behaviors and attitudes. This could manifest in ways that inadvertently reinforce gender disparities, potentially leading to women feeling a diminished connection to the divine. Thus, while the separation of divine gender from human imaging aims to mitigate conflicts and promote inclusivity, the deeply ingrained sociolinguistic patterns and their psychological impacts could perpetuate inequalities, challenging the integrity of egalitarian commitments within the community.

The Most Accurate Language of Metaphysics vs The Best Language

Rea's primary concern lies in the assertion that genderism and traditionalism may fail to portray an accurate metaphysical representation of God. But let's for a moment bear with the traditionalist perspective that God may indeed be gendered. However, even if God has a specific gender or preferences for gendered modes of discourse, advocacy for non-gendered practices can still persist. This is because God's preferences must be balanced

against other preferences in consideration. It is evident that many individuals are adversely affected by the reinforcement of traditional gendered language and practices within the church.

Some may challenge this by proposing a scenario where a group of individuals prefer to refer to a transgender woman using incorrect pronouns, claiming they are discomforted by her using the correct ones. Should their preferences be prioritized over the individual's? I reply, an appropriate counterargument would entail distinguishing between human beings and God. The transgender woman in question experiences vulnerability, unlike God.[46] This distinction validates the prioritization of societal preferences over God's preferences, who is invulnerable, but does not justify prioritizing them over those of vulnerable individuals. We need to shield and uplift the most marginalized members of society, recognizing their unique vulnerabilities. Human individuals, particularly those from marginalized groups such as transgender individuals, face significant social challenges and prejudices. Therefore, in instances where language preferences may conflict, it is both ethical and socially responsible to prioritize the preferences that support the dignity and identity of the vulnerable.

I want to open up a novel distinction between referring to God in best way and referring to God the way that best represent the metaphysics. These seem to sometime come apart; one may provide a more accurate metaphysical representation, albeit at the expense of human suffering, while the other minimizes such suffering, albeit with a less

[46] However, the issue is not solely about vulnerability. It is fundamentally about respect for individual identity and dignity. Using someone's preferred pronouns acknowledges their identity and humanity, which is a basic aspect of respecting their personhood. Therefore, even if individuals were not vulnerable, it would still be inappropriate to use incorrect pronouns for the sake of our own comfort, as it disregards their identity and fails to show proper respect.

precise metaphysical portrayal. Even though a metaphysically accurate reference may be superior, it is a debatable matter whether it is indeed the best approach. Regardless of the metaphysical nature of God (what God is like) — traditionalism, as characterized by Rea — and irrespective of God's preferences, which is another interpretation of traditionalism, we are free to refer to God in any manner we choose. At least, these two aspects do not restrict us conclusively.

It is philosophically consistent to say that God is not metaphysically gendered, and while God may prefer to be referred to in a certain way, I may choose not to use that form of address. This does not constitute philosophical misrepresentation or a rational mistake. I am merely highlighting an alternative method of referring to God that surpasses accurate representation and adherence to God's preferences. Our manner of speaking of God might neither accurately reflect God's nature nor align with God's preferred mode of reference. Yet, it is still the best way as it mitigates human suffering. Since God is not vulnerable, our manner of speaking does not detract from God's essence. God would likely appreciate observing us navigate our paths, learning to love, show mutual respect, prevent conflict, and embody peace, even at the expense of misrepresenting God or contravening God's preferences. God would likely endorse such an approach. This is also in resonance with Rea:

> "*Accuracy can, of course, come apart from legitimacy, permissibility, or propriety. It doesn't automatically follow from the fact that masculine and feminine characterizations come equally close to telling the truth about God that it is morally permissible or liturgically appropriate to characterize God in feminine terms. Accuracy is a matter of metaphysics; propriety is a matter of what is overall most*

> *fitting in light not only of what we know about the relevant metaphysics but also of what we know about God's preferences, likely harms and benefits to human beings and their relationships with God."* (Rea 2016, p4)

I imagine that the absolute best-case scenario would involve an accurate representation that respects God's preferences and contributes to the best possible life. However, these three (God's preferences, metaphysical accuracy, and social preferences) aspects can diverge, and we may need to prioritize one over the others. Perhaps, in the distant future, we will be able to reconcile all three aspects in a single manner of speech. At present, however, many individuals suffer due to relating to God in a manner reminiscent of a child's relationship with their father.

Conclusion

I tried to elucidate some insights regarding whether gender *can* constitute a divine attribute. I argued that the *imago Dei* doctrine does not necessitate all God's attributes being equally reflected in humanity. There exists a conceptual *gap* between the full scope of God's attributes and those constituting human reflection of the divine image. Consequently, God's hypothesized gender does not inherently determine gender attributes within the *imago Dei*. I argued that God's metaphysical gender and humanity's manifestation of the divine image may remain distinct. Thereby, space emerges for conceiving God as gendered without conflicting with modern egalitarian ethics or central theological doctrines like the *imago Dei*. This nuanced analysis charts a middle path between reactionary gender essentialism and radical deconstruction. Traditional practices can be upheld for their

meaningfulness, while reforming language use to promote inclusion. Rather than divine metaphysics directly dictating ethics, the situatedness of religious praxis comes to the fore. The manner in which we speak of God and relate to the divine proves responsive to contingent contexts and human needs. In summary, this thesis has outlined fertile avenues for reimagining God-talk, upholding the richness of creedal heritage while expanding the circle of belonging. By acknowledging the complexity of gender issues and eschewing facile assumptions, space opens to integrate tradition, scripture, philosophy, and lived experience. Finally, let's go back to the title once again: Could Gender be an Attribute of God? Yes!

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