

Consensus

Volume 43
Issue 2 *Queer(y)ing Labels: Dialogues of
Identity*

Article 17

7-25-2022

Language for God: A Lutheran Perspective

Allen Jorgenson

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus>



Part of the [Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Jorgenson, Allen (2022) "Language for God: A Lutheran Perspective," *Consensus*: Vol. 43: Iss. 2, Article 17.

DOI: 10.51644/YYGW8578

Available at: <https://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol43/iss2/17>

This Book Reviews is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in Consensus by an authorized editor of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact scholarscommons@wlu.ca.

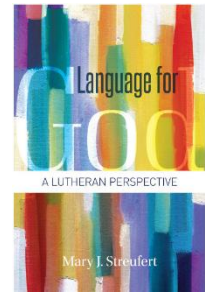
Book Review

Language for God: A Lutheran Perspective

Mary J. Streufert

Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2022

Let me begin by underscoring that this is a book to be bought *and* read. Mary Streufert is the Director for Justice for Women, ELCA at the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. In this volume she calls for “multigendered language and images for God ... unhinging Christian language for God from almost entirely masculine language or gender-neutral language in favor of multiple genders” (p. 8). Streufert is not interested in erasing the use of masculine language in reference to God but balancing it so that all people can imagine that they are made in the image of God.



Streufert helpfully locates her project in the lived experiences of marginalized peoples. While she is especially concerned with queering language used for God from gendered perspectives she is not unaware of nor unengaged in intersectional concerns. Two guiding motifs inform the reader, the first being that of the parable of the Good Householder from Luke 15:8-10, in which Jesus illustrates the divine as a woman searching for what is dear to her. The second is that of a symphony, in which total sound of the music is made by inclusion of parts that together make the whole, even while we most often focus on the melody. She likens feminist theology to the task of “listening closely to a voice, element, or subject that is not the prevailing one in order to know the whole in a new way” (p. 16). She is convinced that our manner of speaking about God is a matter of justice.

Streufert historically explores the one-sex and two-sex understanding of the humanity operative in the past, both of which privilege the male body and remain informative today. In the one-sex version of being human, deeply situated in Christianity via its Hellenistic roots, the male is deemed the normal body, and woman are understood as an aberration of this norm. She notes that in iterations of the ancient world informed by this view, males begat legitimate children while illegitimate children ‘were thought to spring from the genitals of the female’ (p. 25). In the male, ‘seed and intellect were intertwined’ and for this reason the uteri, minds, and voices of women were to be governed by the reasonable male. This way of viewing the world informed the bible, as evidenced in 1 Timothy, even while voices of rupture could be heard in passages such as Galatians 3:28. Yet, the influence of a Hellenistic worldview, in which the human body reflected the order of the cosmos was perdurable, and the male remained the model that reflected the glory of God. Language of God, in this paradigm is necessarily masculine, and voices to the contrary are silenced.

The two-sex view emerged in early modernity, but it did not accomplish the erasure of patriarchy: it differently ensconced it. It also deployed the category of race to fund the legitimacy of the white male. Streufert notes the early modern interest in classifying people to establish superiority. She finds intersection in gender/race as she explores the phenomenon of beards. Early anthropologists and white male apologists proposed the beard as a sign of virility, notably lacking in Indigenous peoples and women. In this view women were deemed not to be deficient men but rather the opposite of the strong man and so the

impossibility of thinking of God using female language was entrenched, even while scripture sometimes upends this. Streufert uses the image of the rooster/cock to illustrate this. The rooster is “an enduring cross-cultural symbol of violent, competitive masculinity” (p. 50). And yet, she notes, Jesus is identified with a mother hen (Matthew 23:37). She proposes that the reigning father image that silences non-males and non-whites can be countered with certain readings of scripture and Luther too.

Of course, Luther was a careful reader of scripture, and a figure dear to Lutherans – despite his dangerous anti-Judaic rants and the invective from his pen against “the Turks,” “papists,” and “Schwärmer” (a derogatory term used of Anabaptists), among others. Streufert helpfully deals with Luther as a paradoxical figure. On the one hand, he clearly inherits the one-sex worldview and is deeply entrenched in patriarchal and parochial paradigms. On the other hand, he was a reformer, and his reformation sensibilities sometimes pushed his thinking to the edges of dominant theological patterns (and beyond in cases). Streufert’s careful reading of Luther’s texts in German serves her well here, allowing us to see important nuances sometimes lost by translators of the oft-referenced *Luther’s Works* (American Edition).

Streufert notes important instances in which Luther counters prevailing trends that are supportive of women and so directly and indirectly embolden non-male images of God. He championed marriage of priests, advocated for education for girls, and upended prevailing inheritance laws which would not have allowed his wife Katie to inherit more than her dowry and those things that belonged to her personally. He spoke against arranged marriages, domestic violence, and took seriously reproductive grief. He commended a prince to pay attention to women in the bible. Of course, Luther remained in his world and continued to assert the superiority of men even while he pushed the edges in discussing the capacities and personhood of women.

Helpfully, Streufert does more than revisit Luther. She uses these insights to articulate a hermeneutic that can assist us as we push the envelope on language addressed to God. She is mindful that “words of Scripture work in us” (p. 91). She asserts that the Word of God as a theological concept cannot be restricted to one gender, and thereby baffles gender literalism. Akin to mystics who preceded him, Luther could describe the Word of God as the divine womb. She describes this living Word as ‘paradoxical, generative, transformative, powerful, and effective (p. 97).

Streufert helpfully underscores that justification matters for theological language in that it disrupts the idolatry and bondage, and so frees us from male-centrism and gender-binary prejudices both. Language for God, then, is creative, redemptive, and inspiring insofar as it is the gospel language.

In a chapter entitled “Transformative Theology: God for Us” Streufert first revisits the book of Galatians in order to demonstrate the power of looking at scripture using a lens suspicious of simply binary constructions. Paul’s self identification as a woman in travail in Gal. 4:19, 20 means that he would be identified by the Romans as a “girly man” (p. 116). Further to this exploration in the Newer Testament, in the Hebrew Scriptures we learn how God is identified in Deuteronomy 32:11,12 as a griffon vulture – most often incorrectly translated as an eagle (a common cypher for empires). It is hard to distinguish the male and females of these vultures, and both sit on eggs until hatched. Once again Streufert helpfully allows us to see scripture in a new light as a result of her careful reading.

Of course, there will be those who find an exercise in looking to Luther as too fraught with the dangers of dealing in the dark sides of both the Christian tradition in general and Lutheranism in particular. For many of us, however, there are creative energies to be found in working within a tradition. Mary Streufert has provided an excellent instantiation of creative, redemptive and inspiring theology that wrestles with its origins. Please buy this book *and* read it.

Allen Jorgenson
Martin Luther University College
Waterloo, Ontario, Canada