
Ongoing Reformation of Language and Spirituality: Intersections with the Finnish Interpretation of Luther and Feminist Scholarship

Kirsi Stjerna

*First Lutheran Los Angeles, Southwest Synod Professor of Lutheran History and Theology, Chair
Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary of California Lutheran University
Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, California
Docent, Theological Faculty, Helsinki University*

Scripture identifies human beings as images of God. This is all of humanity in all our variety. That we are all made in the image and likeness of God is a radical theological anthropology that is linked to the doctrine of God. Such fullness and likeness between God and all humanity is also logically about God—that God is not only beyond gender but *of* all genders. It seems then that Christian theological language for God would be inclusive of all humanity. When it is not, there is major dissonance, even an issue of credibility. A child understands what is at stake.

Child's knowledge

At the age of four, my daughter understood this very clearly. She wondered why the pastor talked about God as if God had a penis. Her follow-up question/conclusion was: if, just if, God was a male, then her brother would be somehow more valuable as a human being, closer to God. Now that would just not be right! That would be ridiculous, her brother agreed! Eventually she did not want to believe in such a God or go to a church where such assumptions are explicitly or implicitly proclaimed Sunday after Sunday.

What we learn from children is that there are many ways of knowing God and that our language matters; the language we use about God can either seriously hinder children's imagination and compromise their authentic experience of the divine or it can deepen it. We know God in our being and seek adequate language. But this is all about more than personal experience. From my perspective, language is about the doctrine of God.

Enough about modalism: The doctrine of God and language

The issue of language is never “just” about language and pronouns. It is about higher truths and knowing God and oneself as God's image. And it is about power. Who is God—and how does our language help us to know God? Whose perspectives matter? It matters whether our theological language emancipates us in knowing God, or if it hinders us or—at worst—excludes us.

My personal story involves many painful and funny stories

What we learn from children is that there are many ways of knowing God and that our language matters; the language we use about God can either seriously hinder children's imagination and compromise their authentic experience of the divine or it can deepen it.

on this issue. I have been asked if I hate men or did not love my father, because I continue to challenge the exclusive use of “Father” in God-language. A most difficult issue comes with Trinitarian language: how to gently express one's Christian belief in a Triune God without predominant He-language? I have been called a modalist more times than I would like to count—and every time I feel that my intelligence and integrity as a theologian is challenged. Recently I came to this conclusion: An accusation of modalism is an excuse to hinder language development in Lutheran theological language because it forecloses dialogue. Labeling deep needs to move away from androcentric theology and language as heresy silences faithful proposals for Trinitarian language. Recently in a classroom discussion on these matters, I had an epiphany moment that could be summarized in a question-statement: Is modalism (or whatever we mean by that) a greater threat (sin) than ongoing sexism?

Not just about a pronoun

I have concluded that the arguments about proper or improper grammar for God are neither about orthodoxy or heresy nor about whose views on God are more sophisticated and “grounded” in

Historical androcentric theology is so deeply rooted in Western Christian imagination that changing the pronouns about God deeply disturbs one's theological core.

Christian roots. Rather, the issue is sexism, blatant and with many heads. Doctrinally speaking, nowhere else is the lingering issue of sexism—the ramifications of which are real dangers for women—so prominent than with God-language. It is important to name this issue as such, to remedy the urgent situation, and to prevent concerns over God-language from being labeled as a marginal feminist concern. With God-language, we are dealing with doctrine, core theology, nothing less than that.

Here is an example from Finnish (my mother tongue) to illustrate some of the concerns over this issue. It is not uncommon to hear comments that “inclusive language is an American feminist concern,” or something of that nature. How people “feel” about the issue depends on what language background they come from. Finnish writers could fool themselves about being “free” or excused from the issues English-speaking writers have, due to the fact that in the Finnish language, there are no male and female pronouns, verbs, or adjectives. Even the traditional gender-dividing nouns (such as equivalents to teacher-ess and steward-ess) have been disclaimed as not appropriate in modern Finnish.

Of God, Finns use the word “Jumala.” God, with no gender implied. This said, many biblical attributes of God strike one as masculine or feminine, but the pronoun used for God is always “hän.” Similarly, the same neutral pronoun is used for men and women. Thus, for a person from that language environment, it is quite peculiar and offensive to hear “he” language about human beings. That just feels very strange!

But when it comes to God language, the tolerance for “He” language amazingly grows. Even against common sense, “He” language for God may be defended by those who ordinarily would stay clear from any gendered language. Reasons for this are theological. Historical androcentric theology is so deeply rooted in Western Christian imagination that changing the pronouns about God deeply disturbs one's theological core. The issue of inclusive language is never “just” about pronouns. Discomfort with changes in ordinary language is already an argument for the necessity to treat inclusive language as a theological issue with critical and compassionate attention—and with urgency.

A matter of doctrinal urgency

Reorienting language about God, of course, involves critiquing beloved sources and interpretations, and it entails interpretive reformations vis-à-vis Scripture and human experience of God.

That is, the inclusive language issue hits right at the heart of all that matters in Christian proclamation of the Gospel.

Inclusive language is a matter of urgency for the future of Lutheran Christian theology and its relevance for future generations is for the sake of all of us. It cannot be belittled or watered down. Too much is at stake. Our image and experience of God is at stake. Our healthy sense of ourselves as God's images is at stake. Furthermore, working to use inclusive language, we explicitly confront sexism in our theology. We name sexism as a sin that is pervasive and needs faithful attention. In our seeking for truth with a theology that has the power to empower, we need to continue to drill to the core persistently and ask invitingly: What language do we use of God? How do you experience and speak of God? Do you feel free to know and speak of God with your own particular human experience and perspective? In this process, every voice and every pronoun counts, for we are all made in the image and likeness of God. In this regard, the issue of inclusive language is also an issue of justice—a central Christian principle.

Where do we go from here? How can the Christian community navigate the emotions and convictions abounding about language? I believe it is helpful to go to the very basics of a Lutheran theology of justification and focus on the spiritual concerns that are shared, regardless of the varied opinions on God-language. For Lutherans, the ultimate concern has been the proper interpretation of Scripture about justification by faith. Finding renewed language for justification goes hand-in-hand with reforms in God-language. Finnish Luther scholarship has generated an eye-opening momentum for this. Equally, it is crucial to unfold and build on the important work of feminist scholars who have paved the way for significant reforms in theology and spirituality, starting with God-language.

In other words, I see crucial treasures toward transformed language of God in the perhaps surprising mutual allegiance of Finnish Luther studies and feminist scholarship. I hereby focus on their promise with a renewed study of Luther. I will articulate some of the intersections I see as relevant to questions over language.

On the Finnish findings¹

Among the many new developments in Luther research of recent decades, two have most significant ramifications: feminist study and the Finnish School of Luther. Both approaches have endured significant suspicion with their re-reading of Luther. It is intriguing to ask where feminist and Finnish Luther research may intersect, as we assess Luther's promise for the future.

The now famous Finnish School of Luther has its roots in the ecumenical conversations in the 1970s between Russian Orthodox and Finnish Lutheran theologians seeking points of connection.²

1. The following is based on a presentation at the Lutheran Women in Theological and Religious Studies meeting, Baltimore, November 22, 2013.

2. As a result, in 1978, Tuomo Mannermaa published his *In Ipsa Fide Christus Adest*, translated into English as *Christ Present in Faith: Luther's View of Justification*, ed. and intro. Kirsi I. Stjerna (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005).

In such a situation, Lutheran ecumenist Tuomo Mannermaa saw Luther's explanation of Paul's letter to the Galatians with new eyes. He saw in Luther's language about justification words that he—and others—had missed before: words implying union with Christ, *theosis* even—words that allowed a connection with the Orthodox partners and words that, he found, revealed how one-sided Lutheran tradition had been in interpreting the gift of justification by faith alone.

With his new reading of Luther, Mannermaa dared to propose that the *Formula of Concord* and those adhering to its word as a “law” had distorted Luther's original intent. In perusing Luther's notes on Galatians, Mannermaa revisited the premise, the process, and the results of justification as a mystical Word-event that transformed the sinner into oneness with Christ.

He concluded that with Luther it is not sufficient to refer to justification as a “favor,” as a declaration of forgiveness, only as a “pardoning of a sinner,” but rather, in Luther's experience and reading of Scripture, justification is a gift in real time; Christ is the subject of the gift; Christ enters the justified and “effects” transformation and holiness, in *totum coram deo, in partim coram hominibus*.³ In other words, Mannermaa's Luther is a powerful teacher of an emancipating theology of inner transformation, and the implications of such theology are many.

A discovery and a change in language like this promises to stimulate not only Luther scholarship but also Lutheran Christians finding in Luther a personally relevant spiritual teacher and in his theology seeds for spiritual transformation in their lives. This radical re-orientation in the interpretation of a core Lutheran doctrine has not happened without significant resistance and criticism. It has entailed willingness to take a fresh look and to adjust the language of our core beliefs. The connection to the inclusive language issue is clear.

On feminist scholarship

As with the Finnish Luther research, the results of feminist scholarship on Luther are substantial.⁴ Without highlighting any particular authors here, I briefly name some of the promising areas of ongoing important work with Luther. First, feminist theologians have an important task to assess Luther's relevance as a theological voice and a spiritual teacher with scholarly feminist questions and methods. Second, by revisiting every single theological assumption in Luther with new feminist hermeneutics, significant paradigm shifts can ensue toward meaningful Luther-an theology for the

3. For example, Tuomo Mannermaa, *Kaksi Rakkautta. Johdatus Lutherin Uskonmaailmaan* (1983), in English: *Two Kinds of Love: Introduction to Luther's Religious World*, trans., ed., and intro. Kirsi I. Stjerna (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010). For other works by Juhani Forsberg, Simo Peura, Sammeli Juntunen, Risto Saarinen, Antti Raunio, and Olli-Pekka Vainio, among others, see the “Afterword” in *Two Kinds of Love*, by Juhani Forsberg.

4. See, for example, Deanna A. Thompson, *Crossing the Divide: Luther, Feminism and the Cross* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004) and Mary J. Streufert, ed., *Transformative Theologies: Feminist, Womanist, and Mujerista Perspectives* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010).

The Finnish Luther research, for its part, reveals a Luther who can be a feminist theologian's ally in many ways.

future. Third, feminist theology brings back to the equation the ubiquitous factor of human experience—gendered experience in particular. Fourth, feminist theologians' pursuit for truth with an inclusive approach leads to new language to express experiences and convictions regarding the divine. Fifth, but not necessarily in order of importance, feminist theology seeks to promote freedom, equality, and emancipation.

The Finnish Luther research, for its part, reveals a Luther who can be a feminist theologian's ally in many ways. First, the Finnish Luther research with its rediscovery of the mystical Luther and with its re-examination of what is meant with core theological statements such as “justification by faith” is on par with feminist scholars' ongoing reconstructive work, the kind of work that seeks to reimagine Luther's relevance as a theologian who speaks to contemporary individuals' spiritual questions.⁵ Second, as the Finnish Luther research has invited the mystical Luther out of the closet, the importance of the existentially transformative power of faith and the experiential dimension of justification has come under new consideration. Third, the Finnish Luther research with its unfolding of the “effective side” of righteousness and the existential effect of the “freedom experience” with “saving” faith reminds us of the original reformation proclamations: Christian freedom (of conscience and from false bondage) and equality of all believers (in the ongoing work of love).

All this has implications not just in how Luther's theology is understood but also on the relevance of Lutheran theology as a transformative power in the world. Both the Finnish and feminist interpretations of Luther lead in this direction and meet in the area called spirituality—which aids Christians in claiming gender-inclusive language as faithful. In the following, a few words are offered on the promise of Luther in terms of spirituality, mysticism, and emancipation in transformation.

A connection in spirituality

Spirituality⁶ has many definitions. Basically, and in Christian language, the term *spiritualitas* speaks to the authenticity of Christian faith and its effect in one's daily life. Spirituality is about a way of orienting oneself from the foundation of what one knows about God as one's creator, and how one perceives one's purpose in life. Beliefs and practices support and shape one's ongoing quest

5. Kirsi Irmeli Stjerna and Brooks Schramm, eds., *Spirituality: Towards 21st Century Lutheran Perspectives* (Minneapolis: Lutheran University Press, 2004).

6. See James Wisemann, *Spirituality and Mysticism* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2006). See also creative works on spirituality, Bonhoeffer, and creation by Lutheran scholar Lisa Dahill.

for a deeper awareness of God's guiding presence in one's life and one's ways of relating to other creatures. With Luther's theology, the word spirituality can simply be used to name the "whole" of how one lives and experiences one's faith in the omnipresent God as one's ground of being and orientation for life—and death.⁷

Authenticity of faith was Luther's main concern when letting out his first calls for reform. It was spiritual ills and hunger that ignited Luther to radical action and to develop new theological perspectives to effectively name God's grace in the midst of human life in its joys and sorrows. Far from desiring to become a social reformer or an instigator of chaos, his primary concerns were spiritual: returning to the authenticity of faith, leading people to experience in faith the immediacy and real presence of God in all the complexities of human life, and underscoring the fundamental equality of sinners and saints as beggars for God's mercy already freely given.⁸

Luther's theology of spirituality is evident in many of his works. For example, in *A Simple Way to Pray, Personal Prayer Book, On the Freedom of a Christian*, and the *Catechisms* Luther speaks directly to human spiritual concerns with practical advice for spiritually rooted living.⁹ Each *Catechism*, in particular, spells out a theological vision for a spirituality of daily life and offers practical advice for an intentional spiritual approach to Christian life. His advice to his barber on how to pray brings to life the doctrine of justification by faith, with a method for enhancing one's spiritual awareness and sense of purpose.

Engaging Luther from the perspective of spirituality allows us to get both deeper and more personal with his theology, and thereby also to unfold the promise of spirituality for transformation. Two factors are important: recognizing the importance of human experience and allowing room for the mystical. These are feminist concerns as well—and pertinent when speaking of God-language.

Mystical

Just as spirituality always involves personal experience and an orientation in "knowing," spirituality also at its core revolves around a mystery that may be hard to put into words but has a real effect on one's life. This is evident also in Luther's case. His theology, as with his spirituality in his own words, is based on an experience of a mystical encounter with God, who spoke to him and transformed his life. With few words Luther writes in his 1545

[Luther's] theology, as with his spirituality in his own words, is based on an experience of a mystical encounter with God, who spoke to him and transformed his life.

Preface to the Latin Edition of his Works about his experience of reading Paul's letter to the Romans, "There I began to understand that ... the righteousness of God is revealed by the gospel, namely, the passive righteousness with which merciful God justifies us by faith. ... Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself though open gates."¹⁰ He had no better words to describe this very mysterious, mystical experience that in very real ways changed his entire life and orientation. The effect of this experience was a new reading both of Scripture and his tradition, which he felt empowered to challenge and reform.

With Mannermaa, the Finnish Luther School has brought to conversation the mystical dimension of Luther's understanding—and experience—of justification.¹¹ Mysticism can simply mean the different elements in one's religion—be it a belief, practice, or experience—that may lead one to a personal experience of God and thus transformation.¹²

It is hardly possible to really "get" what Luther means with justification by faith and all that it implies without accepting the mystical foundation of his discovery. His treatment of the doctrine of justification in his *Two Kinds of Righteousness* and *Commentary on Galatians* are just two examples of the centrality of the mystical dimension in his theology that could best be understood as spiritual theology for a transformed and emancipated life.¹³ They are proof texts for the importance of religious experience in Luther's understanding of how faith becomes real for a person and transforms a person.

Luther's concern as a spiritual teacher was that faith does matter on a personal level. With his efforts to purge medieval Catholic teachings and practices, Luther aimed to provide tools to recover authentic faith experience; Luther wished to clarify the vitality of the Christ Event, a complete and ongoing "for you" experience of transformation into Christ-likeness (as a gift). He preached the invaluable experience of freedom of conscience from all that

7. See, for example, Bernard McGinn, John Meyendorff, and Jean Leclercq, *Christian Spirituality: Origins to the Twelfth Century* (New York: Crossroad, 1985), xv–xvi.

8. See, for example, Phil Krey and Peter Krey, eds., *Luther's Spirituality* (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 2007); Scott Hendrix, "Martin Luther's Reformation of Spirituality" in Timothy J. Wengert, ed., *Harvesting Martin Luther's Reflections on Theology, Ethics, and the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 240–260.

9. See Martin Luther, *A Simple Way to Pray*, LW 43:193–211; *Personal Prayer Book*, LW 43:11–45 [WA 10.I, 375–406]; *On the Freedom of a Christian*, LW 31:333–377 [WA 7:42–49 (Latin), WA 7:20–38 (German)]; *Large Catechism* and *Small Catechism*, in *The Book of Concord: Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, R. Kolb and T. Wengert, eds. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000).

10. LW 34:337.

11. See Mannermaa, *Christ Present in Faith* and *Two Kinds of Love*.

12. For a precious source, see Bernard McGinn, *The Essential Writings of Christian Mysticism* (New York: Modern Library, 2006). For an example of the radicalness of mysticism, see Dorothee Soelle, *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001).

13. See *Two Kinds of Righteousness* in LW 31:297–306 [WA 2:144–152]; Martin Luther, *Lectures on Galatians* (1535), LW 26 [WA 40.I] and LW 27 [WA 40.II]. See also LW 26:3–11.

binds—freedom originating from the transformative experience of being forgiven in/with/because of Christ, and an experience that would bind/lead Christians to serve others out of grace.¹⁴ A theological spiritual vision like this fundamentally resonates with transformative feminist theologies.

Spiritual and emancipatory language

As outlined above, the emancipatory power of the sixteenth century reformation was especially in the spiritual realm. The “reformed” spiritual theology fueled Protestant theologians to radically criticize their own beloved church—its bishops, the pope, its power structures, its overall worldliness, and its bondage to money and power—all the injustice they saw following from a church that had lost its spiritual focus. The new theology, with a new “inclusive” vision of what is spiritual, suggested equality in holiness and in “neediness” for grace. The Protestant spiritual theology with its promise of equality conspicuously spiritualized or sanctified the secular realm and led to events that shifted power structures.

These early reformation concerns are areas underscored by the Finnish re-examination of Luther’s theology; their scholarship leads to serious commitments to language transformation. This is where Lutheran scholarship can pick up the ball and run; feminist scholars are already leading the way. When examining again what “Christ present in faith” and justification of a sinner mean “for real,” and what language best unfolds that, Finnish and feminist Luther scholars are dusting off the emancipatory seed imbedded in Luther’s theology and inviting new participants to discover the source. I see some common Lutheran priorities: 1) spiritual wellness and authenticity of faith with all people, 2) equality of all beggars for God’s grace and the need for freedom of conscience, 3) inclusivity of all sinners and of all areas of life—including theology and spirituality—equally deserving to be emancipated to embrace God’s promises.

With our commitment to transform Lutheran theological language and to start with the urgency of inclusive language, we are following in Luther’s own footsteps. He took radical liberties in

The new theology, with a new “inclusive” vision of what is spiritual, suggested equality in holiness and in “neediness” for grace.

reading the holy texts for himself, critiquing the venerable sources used in his time, and going so far as initiating Bible translation for his contemporaries. Unauthorized, yet fueled by his passion for truth and secure in his trust that the Word of God will prevail, he figured the Word needs to be freed from human-made prisons. Luther did all that with the Scripture. He gave us a model and a stimulus to do the same, not just with Scripture but also with Luther’s own words.

In the spirit of Luther, I propose that we name our grammars and doctrines and scholarly arguments as human efforts to get at the mystery of God, and that we do all in our power to hinder those sources from becoming obstacles for the good seeds of Christian theology and faith to grow. Luther sowed many powerful seeds. Some came to fruition, while some are still dormant. With renewed language, in his good company, we continue the work of the reformation—which was and is a language event.

Discussion Questions

1. In what ways does your experience of God influence your use of language for God?
2. In your own words, describe the way Finnish scholars interpret Luther’s understanding of justification. What do you make of the argument that this deeply spiritual understanding of justification affects language for God?
3. Do you agree or disagree with the common Lutheran priorities named in this article? Why or why not? If you agree, how might these priorities lead to inclusive language for God? If you disagree, where do the priorities you have named lead you in relationship to language for God?

14. See Luther, *On Freedom of a Christian*.