

7-1-1999

Discussion: Abba Father Inclusive Language And Theological Salience

H.E. Barber

Follow this and additional works at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy>

Recommended Citation

Barber, H.E. (1999) "Discussion: Abba Father Inclusive Language And Theological Salience," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 16 : Iss. 3 , Article 10.

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol16/iss3/10>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers by an authorized editor of ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange.

ABBA, FATHER: INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE AND THEOLOGICAL SALIENCE¹

H. E. Baber

Questions about the use of “inclusive language” in Christian discourse are trivial but the discussion which surrounds them raises an exceedingly important question, namely that of whether gender is theologically salient—whether Christian doctrine either reveals theologically significant differences between men and women or prescribes different roles for them. Arguably both conservative support for sex roles and allegedly progressive doctrines about the theological significance of gender, race, ethnicity and sexual orientation are contrary to the radical teaching of the Gospel that in Christ there is no male or female, Greek or Jew, slave or free man.

The use of “inclusive language” in Christian discourse poses the question of whether gender is theologically salient in the sense of either revealing theologically significant differences between men and women or prescribing different roles for them.

Donald Hook and Alvin Kimel claim to “demonstrate that the divine title “‘Father’...possesses privileged and foundational status within Christian discourse” and that alternative nomenclature, specifically the use of “Mother,” is illegitimate. They argue that this result follows from the fact that Jesus authoritatively invoked God as “Abba” or Father together with a causal account of reference according to which current attempts to invoke or refer to God do so to the extent that they figure on a causal chain which originates in Jesus’ authoritative act of dubbing.

Their arguments however presuppose an untenable version of the causal theory of reference as well as questionable assumptions about Jesus’ intention in invoking God as “Abba” which imply that gender is theologically salient. Arguably both conservative views about the significance of gender and allegedly progressive doctrines about the theological salience of gender, race, ethnicity and sexual orientation are contrary to the radical, countercultural teaching of the Gospel that in Christ there is no male or female, Greek or Jew, slave or free man.

I

Hook and Kimel argue that “we name God ‘Father’ because, and only because, we are instructed to do by the Second Person of the Holy Trinity.”² On their account, Jesus decisively fixes the privileged mode of



nomenclature by invoking God as "Father" and this mode of address passes down a causal denoting chain maintained by the Church so that "if we wish to invoke God or refer to him successfully, we rightly return to the ecclesial d-chain. It is the historical community of the Church that equips us to name God truly...for reference to be successful there really must be a path leading back to the object."³

Hook and Kimel claim that their thesis does not presuppose any additional controversial views about the nature of gender but comes solely from the authoritative utterance of Jesus as mediated through Scripture and the Tradition of the Church:

When God is identified as Father, the model of fatherhood is proposed as a paradigm by which deity is to be interpreted. Because the mode of presentation is metaphorical, such usage commits one to saying that God both is like and is not like a human father in specific ways...By this metaphorical presentation biological sex and cultural stereotyping may be excluded from our understanding of deity.⁴

Hook and Kimel suggest that Jesus' invocation of God as "Father" is revelatory as well as authoritative: "kinship terms of address...spoken within the familial relationship" are especially apt in revealing the nature of our relationship to God in Christ.⁵ "Father," they argue, enjoys a privileged status that other kinship terms, including "Mother," do not in light of the following considerations:

- (1) "Abba" was Jesus' mode of address for God and our use of "Father" to describe and invoke the deity is causally connected to Jesus' invocation through an "ecclesial d-chain."
- (2) "Mother" and "Father" are mutually exclusive terms: a correct ascription of one term to an individual precludes the correct ascription of the other so that they cannot be substituted one for the other. "To do so," they suggest, "is to disrupt gender concord and confuse the hearer."

The fact that, applied to the deity, the use of 'Mother' and 'Father' must be metaphorical...does not alter this more basic grammatical point: if 'Father' properly designates the deity, then 'Mother' cannot logically do so—and vice versa...Metaphor does not obliterate the conventional meaning of a word.⁶

Thus, on the account Hook and Kimel suggest, "Abba" names God, and the privileged and foundational status which Jesus' invocation confers on "Abba" is transmitted down the ecclesial d-chain to "Father." "Mother" cannot be substituted for "Father" since "Mother" and "Father" are mutually exclusive.

The suggested account is reminiscent of mathematical induction:

Base Step: Jesus established [or revealed] "Abba" as a *foundational name* of God by invoking him as "Abba."

Induction Step: N is a foundational name of x if N is a *referential succes-*

sor of a foundational name.

It is the account of referential succession Hook and Kimel assume that lets "Father" in while excluding "Mother." Their account can be reconstructed as follows:

N is a referential successor of N* iff

(1) the practice of using N to refer to x is causally linked to the use of N* and

(2) N and N* are logically compatible with regard to any significant descriptive content they may possess.

According to Hook and Kimel, "Father" succeeds Jesus' "Abba" on an ecclesial d-chain insofar as the practice of translating rather than transliterating "Abba" is established within the Church. "Father" they note, "confers descriptive content, which is why the word is always translated from language to language as the Gospel moves into new cultures."

Translators operating from within the Church conventionally translate "Abba" rather than transliterating it and in so doing signal that they regard the descriptive content of the term as significant. "Father is a referential successor of "Abba" and, therefore, given their account of "foundational" names is a foundational name of God.

"Mother," Hook and Kimel argue, is not a referential successor of "Abba" since its descriptive content is logically incompatible with that of "Abba." Consequently, "Mother" fails (2). Its use as a foundational name, Hook and Kimel suggest, would require a "new revelation"—presumably a new act of authoritative tagging comparable to Jesus' invocation of God as "Abba."

II

It is not clear whether the criterion for referential succession reconstructed from the account suggested by Hook and Kimel is intended to apply to all referring expressions that have descriptive content, to those which they identify as titular names, a class which includes "mother," "father" and other kinship terms, or only to those uses of titular names that have foundational status, in particular, to the use of "Father" to invoke and refer to God. (i) If however the intent of Hook and Kimel is to articulate an account of reference specific to foundational names then the account is ad hoc and they have not established the result which it is supposed to support; (ii) if it is intended to be an account of how titular names or kinship terms generally function it is plainly false.

(i) It is disputed whether "father" as used to invoke and refer to God possesses a privileged status which disqualifies all antonymous names and other expressions from referring to him. If it could be shown that there were non-contentious cases of referring expressions which were significantly similar to "father" in possessing a similarly privileged status and which uncontroversially precluded antonymous expressions from referring, that would lend support to the thesis of Hook and Kimel that the same was true of the theological use of "father."

Hook and Kimel however make no attempt to show that there are other referring expressions which play a privileged and foundational

role within their respective contexts comparable to the role that they assert "father" plays within Christian discourse. In fact there do not seem to be any: the foundational status they ascribe to the ecclesial use of "father" and its cognates appears to be *sui generis*. Consequently they cannot point to the behavior of comparable referring expressions in cases which are not contentious in support of their disputed thesis that "father," in virtue of its foundational status, behaves as they contend it does, in particular, that it precludes the use of antonymous expressions as its referential successors.

Hook and Kimel may indeed *stipulate* that no referring expression, N, which is antonymous to a foundational name, N*, of an object can be a referential successor to N*, build this into the criteria for investing a name with foundational status and conclude that non-foundational names for God shall not be used in liturgical or theological contexts because "foundational name" is a term of art which they themselves have invented. It has no precedent in Scripture or Tradition so they are at liberty to define it as they choose.

They have not however provided any reason why Christians ought to buy into this account other than an interest in supporting the contention that "Father" should be used within the Church to invoke and refer to God and that "Mother" should not, which is precisely what is in dispute. Thus if their proposed conditions for referential succession are meant to attach only to "foundational" names they have not made their case.

(ii) Taken as an account of reference generally, the conditions which Hook and Kimel propose for referential succession are implausible. They yield highly unintuitive results in a variety of ordinary cases where speakers misdescribe the objects to which they refer. Causal theories of reference attempt to accommodate our intuitions in such cases and in the absence of special theological concerns, such as Hook and Kimel suggest arise from the "foundational" status of "Father," they provide no cause for concern about the possible failure of "Mother" to refer to the Being Jesus invoked as "Abba" even if "Mother" is, in some respect, misleading.

A virtue of causal theories of reference vis-a-vis description theories is their ability to explain how language users may succeed in referring to objects when they are ignorant or positively mistaken about their character. Thus, in an early article on the causal account of reference, Keith Donnellan, cites a variety of cases in which definite descriptions that are descriptively inaccurate succeed in referring. Distinguishing between the attributive and referential uses of definite descriptions, he notes that a speaker uses an expression referentially in order to enable his audience to pick out whom or what he is talking about.⁸ As the cases he cites suggest, we may succeed in picking out a person or thing for the purpose of asking a question or making an assertion about it by means of a description which is inaccurate.

Donnellan and other causal theorists have considered circumstances in which the descriptive content of referring expressions for language users and their communities may deflect or defeat reference. Reference however is robust: generally, contriving convincing cases in which refer-

ence is deflected or defeated requires the construction of elaborate scenarios or stories in which speakers make gross errors.

Perhaps I fail to refer in some extreme circumstances...suppose that I think that I see at some distance a man walking and ask, 'Is the man carrying the walking stick the professor of history?' We should perhaps distinguish four cases.... (a) There is a man carrying a walking stick....(b) The man over there is not carrying a walking stick but an umbrella....(c) It is not a man at all but a rock....(d)...there is nothing at all where I thought there was a man with a walking stick...perhaps a trick of light made me think there was a man there.⁹

Donnellan suggests that, intuitively, reference succeeds in all but the last case: "failure of reference...requires circumstances much more radical than the mere non-existence of anything fitting the description used. It requires that there be nothing of which it can be said, 'That is what he was referring to.'"¹⁰

A causal connection between the use of a name and an act of tagging does not always suffice to secure reference. Gareth Evans and others have considered circumstances in which the descriptive content of names for language users and their linguistic communities may affect or defeat reference.¹¹ Nevertheless apart from special theological considerations such as Hook and Kimel suggest, the case of antonymy they cite does not appear to be a defeater.

Mistakes about kinship status and gender are common and do not appear to defeat reference. We may successfully refer to babies and young children without knowing their gender and to adolescents who cultivate a unisex look even when we are mistaken. Under less than optimal observational conditions we easily make such mistakes. When I see other parents at a distance in their cars picking up their children or dropping mine off in the evening I often mistake mothers for fathers and vice versa. My children set me straight but none of us seriously doubts that I have succeeded in referring to them.

An advantage of the causal theory of reference over description theories is precisely their success in delivering the intuitively correct results in clear cases like this. Adopting the kind of descriptive criteria Hook and Kimel propose, according to which mistakes about parental gender make reference at best questionable, undermines an important motivation for preferring causal accounts of reference to description theories.

The appeal of Hook and Kimel to the causal theory of reference in support of their thesis fails. Without special theologically motivated provisos, the causal theory of reference will not generate the results they seek, and the theological motivation for their account, beyond an *ad hoc* interest in blocking the use of "Mother" in theological contexts is, at best, obscure. The provision of terminology and technical machinery to articulate a controversial thesis does not contribute to showing that the thesis is true and Hook and Kimel have provided no compelling reason to believe that their account has any independent motivation.

III

Hook and Kimel suggest that there may be independent theological reasons to avoid using "Mother" to invoke and refer to God within the Church. Their concern appears to be that "mother" and "father" designate roles which may be "theologically incompatible."

Theoretically, the title 'Mother' could be substituted for 'Father,' either by tying it into the current Father-chain or by instituting a new referential path. The following questions would still have to be answered satisfactorily before the Church could authorize either option. Do we know that God accepts 'Mother' as a vocative substitute for 'Father'? If it is advanced that God is now inviting prayer to him/her as Mother, this claim would appear to require a new revelation....Is such revelation probable in light of the eschatological finality of 'Father'?....Considerations regarding content also appear at this point. Are the terms synonymous? If they are not (as we argue below) then judgment must be made as to their theological compatibility.¹²

While they argue at length that "Mother" and "Father" are incompatible in the sense that they cannot accurately describe the same [normal?] individual in literal discourse, they do not offer any compelling reason why such incompatibility in literal discourse should render expressions theologically incompatible when used metaphorically or analogically as they grant to be the case for talk about God as Father.¹³ Literal theological discourse is indeed constrained by such logical requirements. The thesis that God is omnipotent, for example, is theologically as well as logically incompatible with claims to the effect that his power is in some respects limited.

Religious discourse which is metaphorical or analogical however does not operate within these constraints. Scripture includes a variety of metaphorical and analogical expressions which all orthodox Christians recognize as proper designations of God that are logically incompatible in the sense that they could not be literally true of the same individual. In St. John's Gospel, Jesus proclaims himself to be the Good Shepherd, the Way, the True Vine, and the Bread that comes down from Heaven, designations which cannot be literally true of the same individual.

Within religious discourse gender also sits lightly. So Thomas Berry in a popular religious studies text book, apparently oblivious to conceptual difficulties, notes of the transformation of the bodhisattva Avalokitesvara within the Buddhist Tradition:

"This savior personality, originally a masculine figure, was gradually changed by the Chinese into a feminine figure...Eventually Avalokitesvara, as Kuan-Yin, became the goddess of mercy of the East-Asian world."¹⁴

Both scholars who view the Buddhist Tradition from without and religious believers within the Tradition identify Avalokitesvara and Kuan-Yin. Although "god" and "goddess" are antonyms neither

Buddhists nor scholars of Buddhism seem to have any logical compunctions about describing Kuan-Yin as the Chinese representation of the bodhisattva called "Avalokitesvara" in Tibet. Their identity of role together with the causal connection between references to them make the identification of Avalokitesvara and Kuan-Yin compelling. Similarly, early within the Church's history, Christ was identified with the divine wisdom, personified as the female figure Sophia and Christians have had no logical scruples about invoking him as such: "O Word of God incarnate, O Wisdom from on high."

Hook and Kimel say nothing about the alleged non-biological difference between fatherhood and motherhood as roles but repeatedly invoke the grammatical incompatibility of "mother" and "father" in support of the thesis that even in metaphorical discourse where the biological components of gender do not figure they designate distinct properties which may be theologically incompatible. The grammatical antonymy of "mother" and "father" by itself does not however support even a *prima facie* case for the distinctness or incompatibility of the roles they designate.

Gender distinctions in the designation of social and professional roles are dying out in English as a consequence of political correctness and the natural tendency of English to lose inflections: "Poetess" is now archaic, "actress" may be on the way out, and "directress" survives only within altar guild contexts. In these cases however grammatically masculine and feminine forms do not mark any difference in role but rather track the gender of the roles' occupants.

By contrast "governor" and "governess" designate entirely different roles. A woman who occupies the office of chief state executive is never called a "governess." A sign that the governor/governess distinction is one of role rather than mere grammatical gender is precisely the willingness of language users who make the distinction to allow that women may be governors as well as governesses. Language users who make the actor/actress distinction by contrast will not allow for the characterization of some women as actors and other as actresses precisely because this distinction merely marks the gender of the occupant and indicates no difference in role.

Like actor/actress, and unlike governor/governess, "mother" and "father" appear to designate the same role occupied by a woman and a man respectively: a mother is a female parent; a father is a male parent.¹⁵ Once the biological components of parenthood and "cultural stereotyping" are factored out it is hard to see what remains of any difference in role, and the oddity of suggesting in literal discourse that there could be female fathers as well as mothers suggests that, like most gender-marked designations of social and professional roles, the mother/father distinction merely serves to track the gender of the occupant.

Hook and Kimel suggest that kinship terms are significant in Christian discourse insofar as they evoke a role God plays in relation to us through Christ. Whether fatherhood and motherhood are different roles or not, the grammatical considerations they cite do not by themselves make even a *prima facie* case for holding that motherhood and

fatherhood are different roles much less theologically incompatible ones, or any reason to think that “father” and “mother” do not do an equally good job of designating the parental role which God occupies vis-a-vis his creatures.

IV

Finally it may be suggested that calling God “Mother” is potentially misleading to the extent that it is a product of linguistic revision in support of an agenda. “Mother” as currently used to invoke and refer to God, is often embedded in an ideology which some argue is heterodox.

If the ideological commitments of a linguistic community are too far out of whack reference may be deflected or fail. Consider the case of “Santa Claus,” a corruption of the Dutch name of St. Nicholas, a fourth century bishop of Myra. Legends developed about Bishop Nicholas shortly after his death—people told stories *about* him and had false beliefs *about him*. Some Santa Claus lore can be traced back to these stories and there is a clear causal chain extending from the dubbing of Bishop Nicholas to the current use of “Santa Claus.” However virtually no one wants to say that contemporary Santa Claus lore is really about Bishop Nicholas.¹⁶

It is not clear when the St. Nicholas myth got out of hand. Nevertheless, unquestionably, at this point Santa Claus lore about the elves workshop and the Miracle on 34th Street has so swamped the core story about a generous bishop who anonymously gave dowries to poor girls, that Santa Claus talk is not *about* the historical St. Nicholas at all. Given the surrounding ideology the causal chain linking “Santa Claus” to the Bishop of Myra does not suffice to secure reference.

Similarly, even if there is a causal chain linking Jesus’ invocation of God as “Father” to current use of “Mother” to designate the First Person of the Trinity, it may be argued that reference is defeated if these terms are embedded in an ideology remote from Jesus’ intention, the theology implicit in Scripture, and the practice of the Church.

One reason for concern is the alleged incompatibility of feminine language and imagery with the traditional understanding of God as “pure act.” Many advocates of calling God “Mother” are motivated by an interest in affirming God’s possession of qualities which they and their opponents alike regard as characteristically feminine—his receptivity, nurturance and care. Their opponents worry that this account fails to do justice to the alleged centrality of his metaphysical characteristics which it is suggested “fit together so as to designate one simple property of having necessarily pure, limitless, intentional power.”¹⁷ On this account, power, allegedly a masculine property, is central to our understanding of the divine nature; God’s nurturance and care, shown in his transactions with us as revealed in Scripture and most particularly through his Incarnation as Jesus Christ are secondary to his metaphysically essential core characteristics as God. Thus Hook and Kimel suggest that “we may speak figuratively of God as an eagle nurturing her young or as a mother bear protecting her cubs; but we will name him ‘father’ and not ‘mother.’”¹⁸

These considerations are not persuasive. It is a moot point whether we ought to conceive of God primarily as a being of pure, limitless, intentional power and only secondarily or figuratively as loving and nurturing. More importantly for the purpose of this discussion it is also controversial whether we should identify power as masculine and nurture as feminine for theological purposes. Scripture and Tradition are replete with masculine nurturant images, most notably that of the Good Shepherd, and feminine images of power, including the image of the Woman Clothed in the Sun crushing the Serpent under her heel. Insofar as we deny the assumption that gender is theologically salient, we shall reject the identification of power as masculine and nurture as feminine and regard gendered talk about God as ideologically innocent.

Arguably, while the use of gendered language may be innocuous, the thesis that gendered nomenclature is theologically significant is not. Indeed, insofar as it assumes that gender is theologically salient, it is contrary to Scripture and the Church's Tradition.

The Church is incarnate in a world where distinctions of race, blood and gender figure and it accommodates itself to its cultural context—like Paul, all things to all men in order to win all to Christ. Still, speculative doctrines about the ontological foundations of gender have never been central to Christian theology. No such doctrines figure in the historic creeds of the Church and to the extent that Christian bodies have supported sex roles they have done so as part of a more global program of enjoining Christians to do the duties prescribed for the state of life in which they were called. This affirmation of the existing order may or may not be legitimate. What is significant is that traditionally gender has not typically been conceived of as deeper, more "ontologically" significant or more theologically loaded than other features of individuals' biological heritage or social location.

The thesis that "Father" as distinct from "Mother" possesses a "foundational, privileged status" appears to presuppose that gender is theologically salient, that there are theologically significant differences between males and females and, to the extent that this distinction is taken to be normative as well as descriptive, that men and women ought, in at least some respects, to play different roles. This is contrary to the radically countercultural Christian insight that there are no significant differences—between male and female, Greek and Jew, slave or free.

University of San Diego

NOTES

1. I am grateful to Jeffrey Needle and to the editor of this journal who read and commented on this paper, to Phillip Grogans for his comments at the November 1996 SEAD Conference where an earlier version of this paper was presented, and to others who participated in the discussion.

2. Donald D. Hook and Alvin F. Kimel, Jr., "Calling God 'Father': A Theolinguistic Analysis," *Faith and Philosophy*, vol. 12, No. 2, (April 1995), 216

3. Hook and Kimel, 218
4. Hook and Kimel, 214
5. Hook and Kimel, 216-7
6. Hook and Kimel, 218
7. Hook and Kimel, 215
8. Keith Donnellan, "Reference and Definite Descriptions" in *Naming Necessity and Natural Kinds*, Stephen P. Schwartz, ed. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977), pp. 42-65.
9. Donnellan, pp. 57-8
10. Donnellan, p. 58
11. Gareth Evans, "The Causal Theory of Names," in *Naming Necessity and Natural Kinds*, Stephen P. Schwartz, ed. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977), pp. 192-215
12. Hook and Kimel, 218
13. vide Hook and Kimel, 214
14. Thomas Berry, *Religions of India* (Chambersburg, PA: Anima Publications, 1992), p. 179
15. vide, e.g. the *Pocket Oxford Dictionary*.
16. This example was suggested to me by John Baber who in the past held that "Santa Claus" in fact referred to St. Nicholas of Myra. "Santa Claus," he asserted, "really did exist—he's just dead."
17. So, for example, Richard Swinburne in *The Christian God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, p.126) holds that omnipotence, omniscience and omnibenevolence "fit together so as to designate one simply property of having (necessarily) pure, limitless, intentional power."
18. Hook and Kimel, p. 220.