While marking undergraduate Religious Studies papers written on early Christian scriptures, I noted in many margins that it would be wise for the students to consider incorporating general inclusive language into their essay writing. As is commonly the case, “man” and “he” were often used as generic references to people. Later, I found myself thinking once again of inclusive language when various students referred to “God” as “He” or “Father.” But it seemed to me that somehow these uses of “he” and “He” were two different cases.

Not long after this I came across two articles on inclusive language in a recent issue of *Studies in Religion* (Milne 1989 and Clarkson 1989). While the first was on the general use of gender inclusive terminology within the academy, the second promoted the use of gender-neutral god-language. That these two articles appear back-to-back made me question whether the Canadian academic community sees any difference between the subject areas of the two articles. Is gender-neutral god-language simply a more specific application of general inclusive language? I have decided that the two applications of gender-neutral language are remarkably different. As a result I offer this reflection on the wider problem of naming and the use of theological language within the context of Religious Studies.¹

My question simply is this, By what name shall we, as academic students of religion, know the unknowable?² As well as being an issue of some importance to religious devotees, naming can present a problem for students in Religious Studies as well. Specifically, the problem of naming arises in two related instances, both of which lie within the sphere of the

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¹ By Religious Studies I mean the social scientific pursuit, carried out from within an historical-critical framework and sometimes termed the academic study of religion.

² By referring to the object of religious discourse and worship as “unknowable” or even an “object” (not to be confused, of course, with the objective of religious discourse) I appear to be taking a theological stand, I return to this issue at the close of this paper.
academic study of religion. First, as noted above, one must take account of the feminist movement. As a result of their critique of language and behavior, a variety of traditional terms, such as “Father,” or “King,” no longer are acceptable in many contemporary Christian theological circles. The justification for the diminishing usage of such names—and their inventive replacement by such words as, “Comforter,” or “Redeemer”—arises from a conception of the changing relevance of language to its historical context.

The second instance arises when one works within a number of religious traditions simultaneously, as in the many world religion courses taught at both secondary and postsecondary schools. When confronted with a variety of deities all originating from within culturally and historically distinct contexts, an instructor might refer to them all through the use of one general term. Within North America, this term often is “God.”

I believe that I understand the temptation to refer to the object of religious discourse in general as “God,” or to the idea of deity within the Christian religion as “Father.” The assumption made in each case is that the conventional term is plastic enough to take on a purely generic sense. However, there are several difficulties with such reasoning. First, one no longer has any choice but to acknowledge that one’s terminology has a unique cultural and historical background which, at best, would have to be stretched to a significant extent to integrate divergent conceptions. Such an integration risks overlooking and de-emphasizing characteristics which do not blend nicely into a synthesis of deity. Christian feminists have convincingly demonstrated that due to particular contemporary social facts, the term “Father” is inadequate and inelastic, and actually distorts and limits the full meaning of the Christian experience. Likewise, many would argue that the concept “God” also lacks the elasticity necessary for generic uses.

But suppose we grant that “God” possesses the necessary conceptual elasticity. A second problem then arises: how is one to interpret nontheistic conceptions within religious discourse? Third—and here is the specific problem for students of religion—is one not somehow to identify and, in the very least, bracket any form of Christian or other religious influence? Are not we, as scholars of religion, to be theologically impartial in our

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3 Although “gods” solves some of the problems of the theological assumptions behind our terminology, strictly speaking, it is unable to represent the conceptions of absolute which lie at the heart of the non-theistic religions.