God, Gender and Social Roles: A Study in Relation to Empirical-Theological Models of the Trinity

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Summary
This study aims to investigate the relationship between gender, gender-specific language about God, social roles and their influence upon empirical-theological models of the Trinity. It is the third study emerging from a survey of theology students in the UK conducted in 2003-2005 (N = 244). The findings suggest that there is an attitudinal difference between men and women, with men preferring masculine images and women feminine images, which also tend to be associated with specific social roles and models of the Trinity. In particular, feminine imagery for God and a positive attitude towards the ordination of women are statistically significant predictors of a positive attitude towards the Transgender model of the Trinity.

Keywords
Trinity, feminism, gender, God-language

1. Introduction

The impact of feminist theology is significant and especially in relation to the language that is used in the church’s liturgy and hymnody. Traditional masculine categories are under challenge and feminine images and constructs are being introduced from a variety of church traditions. Therefore it is of interest to explore the attitudes of those who are training for church ministry in order to understand the beliefs and values that are being brought to the church’s life and work. This study aims to explore this area by means of a questionnaire survey of theology students in the United Kingdom. It is an indicative study, building on two other publications from the same survey data exploring different empirical-theological models of the Trinity (Cartledge, 2006; 2009), and it should prove useful in elucidating the various views that are held by this constituency. Two different views of the relationship of language to the nature of God and Trinitarian thought are outlined before a
mediating position is noted and a summary of the relevant empirical-theological research in the area of images of God is described. The survey and its results are explained before a discussion is advanced that demonstrates its significance for understanding theology students in the UK today and its implications for empirical studies in theology.

2. The Trinity, Images of God and Gender-Specific Language

2.1. A Traditional View

A traditional view can be found in the work of Thomas F. Torrance (1996) who writes from a Barthian perspective (Colyer, 2002). From this position, what we know about God is given to us by divine revelation. God can only be known by the gracious self-revelation of God to us. Torrance states his position in the following way:

...in 'the Holy Trinity' we have to do with God himself, not just modal ways of thinking about God, for the One true God is actually and intrinsically Triune and cannot be conceived otherwise. There is in fact no real knowledge of God except through his revealing or naming of himself as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, for the three Persons are the One true God. The only God there is, is he who has named himself to Israel as 'I am who I am / I will be who I will be', and who as the same Lord has personally come to us as 'God with us', clothed with his triune self-revelation and self-designation as Father, Son and Holy Spirit (Torrance, 1996: 15-16).

Thus for Torrance the Christian doctrine of God is inescapably Christocentric and is known in self-revelation and self-communication in the incarnation, in an objective manner such that the imprint of the divine hypostasis is identical to very Being of God himself. That is why the Gospels display God in his very being in the accounts of his revealing and saving acts (Torrance, 1996: 21). Torrance is absolutely clear that revelation is not about God, but God revealing himself in his way and out of himself in such a manner that the one who is revealed and the one who is are the same. ‘That is to say, God is at once the Subject and the Object of revelation, and never the Object without also being the Subject (Torrance, 1996: 22).’

God’s self-revelation takes into account our human speaking, hearing and knowing. Therefore, there is an anthropomorphic component but it is not generated by us independently of God. It is not part of a cultural inheritance from the past that we may replace as we choose. Rather it is what God himself has adapted and defined in his unique self-revelation to us. Humankind has been created for fellowship with God, made in his image, rather than the other