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# GENDER AND LANGUAGE AND QUAKER RELIGIOUS DISCOURSE

SUSAN JEFFERS

Ruth Pitman's essay raises many issues worthy of attention; I hope that readers will respond to them all. Friend Ruth discusses how we (Friends and others) speak about gender, and why, and some of the ethical implications of our choices about speech. I take her piece as a starting point and go in a somewhat different direction, trying to listen for interplay between our gender-related speech and our Quakerly spiritual process. I suggest ways that we could perhaps use our gender-related speech to open ourselves to the divine in ways that would not have been accessible in earlier times.

I want to reach back to Friends' early ways, including pervasive living engagement with the Bible, and also to reach forward to the Light that is always available to guide us, the Voice that calls us, the Spirit that we breathe and feel moving through and around us, individually and together in Quaker community.

As always, the metaphorical possibilities are endless (reaching, light, voice, breath), but I will emphasize the auditory. I hope to evoke such everyday experiences as searching for a radio station, of "tuning in" to some sound or voice, of finally understanding or agreeing with someone ("getting on the same wavelength," "resonating"), along with conversational phenomena like asking a question, offering a description, letting someone have their say, interrupting, speaking up.

I am trying to "tune in" to the auditory for three reasons: First, my own liberal/progressive branch of Friends already uses visual metaphors, especially Light, quite heavily; I'm hoping to play a less familiar tune. Auditory phenomena offer a range of responsive, back-and-forth, communicative metaphors with many hints of divine-human counterpoint. Second, spoken language and all sorts of other sounds permeate both the Bible and early Friends' writings. From Elohim in Genesis 1:3 saying "Let there be light" through the still small voice (I Kings 19:12) and the Psalmist's "joyful noise" (Psalm 66:1 and others), to the divine-human exchange at the very end of the New Testament,<sup>1</sup> sounds and voices abound. Early Friends' practice of silent worship and speaking as led, along with their testimony of

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plain speech, were outward manifestations of their deep awareness of the power of the auditory.<sup>2</sup> Third, I especially hope to help us listen for and participate faithfully in the Spirit, in and through our conversations with one another.

Margaret Fell's essay "Women's Speaking Justified"<sup>3</sup> provides some examples of a way of using and interpreting gender-related language that contrasts with what one generally hears nowadays, whether "feminist" or "traditional" speech. At first glance, one might think this a purely polemical text: Quaker women like Fell were criticized for preaching, for "speaking in the Church," and Fell cites Scripture to prove her point, that women are as able as men to speak "by the Spirit and Power of the Lord Jesus."

No doubt Fell sincerely hoped to convince other Christians that men in positions of outward authority ought not prevent women from preaching simply on the basis of their sex. However, I hear a deeper reality behind Fell's words. She seems to be listening to the whole of Scripture as extended metaphor for life in the Spirit, and also simultaneously speaking to the outward reality of her time and place as extended metaphor for life in the Spirit. Inward reality operates synergistically with outward reality.

The Bible describes many women, both characters in narrative and poetic personifications like Woman Wisdom of Proverbs 8. Fell uses some of these as illustrations of how actual women are regarded by God. But then comes the so-called "marriage metaphor." One common way of understanding this biblical figure of speech follows the definition of metaphor as known idea or image describing an unknown one: in the metaphor "Love is a rose," the abstract unknown love is compared to the concrete or specific rose, with lessons perhaps to be drawn therefrom. In any metaphor, the abstract unknown "is" the concrete known in only some respects; in other respects it "is not."<sup>4</sup>

So for the biblical metaphor of Israel, or the church, as wife, married to the husband God, or Jesus, one might take the "known" as a straw-man stereotype of Christian marriage, stodgy and patriarchal, not much good for women and reinforced by certain Bible stories where a wife is abused by her husband; this "known" might be thought to point to the "unknown," the nature of humanity's relationship to God. One naturally protests using such a model theologically.

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Fell, on the other hand, says this: “the Church of Christ is represented [in the Bible] as a Woman; and those that speak against this Woman’s speaking, speak against the Church of Christ, and the Seed of the Woman, which Seed is Christ.” We are to understand ourselves, corporately, as a woman, a bride, a wife to Christ. Fell says: “Christ is the Husband, to the Woman as well as the Man, all being comprehended to be the Church,” and “For Christ in the Male and in the Female is one, and he is the Husband, and his Wife is the Church.”

What does this mean, exactly? For one thing, Fell takes Paul’s admonition about women speaking in the church, as applying to all of us as a group. In 1 Cor 14:35 Paul says “And if they [women] will learn any thing, let them ask their husbands at home: for it is a shame for women to speak in the church.” To this Fell says that yes, the wife should go home and ask her husband if she has questions, if she wants to learn: everyone together and individually is the wife, and each and all should go inward and ask his or her husband, Christ.

Or again says Fell:

Rev. 22. 17. The Spirit saith, Come, and the Bride saith, Come; and so is not the Bride the Church? and doth the Church only consist of Men? You that deny Women’s Speaking, answer: Doth it not consist of Women, as well as Men? Is not the Bride compared to the whole Church? And doth not the Bride say, Come? Doth not the Woman speak then, the Husband, Christ Jesus, the Amen? And doth not the false Church go about to stop the Bride’s Mouth? But it is not possible; for the Bridegroom is with his Bride, and he opens her Mouth.

Part of listening to the Bible and letting the text itself get a word in edgewise, is remembering that it is profoundly androcentric. Except when the text goes out of its way to include a female, or females in general, more than likely the speaker or writer is (to be thought of as) male, is addressing (mostly) males, speaking of (mostly) males. Some Friends will reject the value or even the morality of engaging such a text. I do not, no more than I reject Euclidean geometry, Newtonian mechanics, or Einstein. Just because it was mostly men writing and reading and applying these texts and ideas, doesn’t mean they are not “for me.”

I believe that Quakerly tuning in to the metaphorical gender-speak of the Bible and early Friends can call us to a fuller “living by” the Word uttered within; perhaps we’ve been practicing “the feminists’ language” long enough now, that we can tune into biblical gender language with new ears, so to speak. Here are a few examples of how one might try to hear with new ears:

1. Try to hear,<sup>5</sup> and enter into, Bible stories about men, with yourself as one of the men. Pay particular attention to whatever sounds accompany the passage in your imagination. Try to hear Bible stories about women, with yourself as one of the women. Do the same with the inanimate objects: in Psalm 23 try being the shepherd, the pasture, the water, the path, the one leading and the one led. In John 1:23 be the voice, the one crying (John the Baptist), the wilderness itself. In John 4 be the woman, the well, Jesus, the water, the cup, Samaria, the Samaritans. Spend extra time with whichever of these feels least comfortable or natural. Listen for whatever new resonance<sup>6</sup> may be present for you. Most of us spend so much time “picturing” things, it takes special openness to discern the sounds.
2. The Bible and early Friends often speak of the people of God as the “bride” or “wife” of God / Jesus. Try on the idea of your Quaker meeting, or “all Friends everywhere,” as the bride or wife, with Jesus or God as husband. Try to imagine the conversations this bride or wife has with her husband; what he says, and what she says, what they find to talk about, how they get along. Listen closely to what the metaphor says to you. What is it like, to be married to God, to Jesus? Take to heart Friend Ruth’s words about marriage and future: how, specifically, is such a marriage constituted “for the good of the next and subsequent generations”? What sort of children might this divine-human marriage beget, and nurture? I suspect it may be particularly profitable for Friends who have never been married to contribute to this discussion, as they may be less likely to have their personal experience of an outward spouse drown out the voice of their husband Christ.
3. Practice listening to biblical and Quaker texts with careful attention for what we might be missing, nowadays, because of the language we use, the sound bites we repeat without

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surrounding context, the old-fashioned or sexist language we feel compelled to modify in order to comport with our cultural mindset. The idea of Christ our husband speaking to us his wife may offend some. But maybe some can get on the married-to-Christ wavelength, and listen for the sounds of the marriage, of the courtship, romance, begetting children, troubles that come with marital strife, infidelity, etc.<sup>7</sup>

Should Friends refer to humans in the collective as “man”<sup>8</sup> or as “people” or as “humanity” or as “human beings”? Should we call committed romantic-sexual-type partnerships (between same-sex or opposite-sex couples) “marriage”? Should we even use such a term as “sex” or “gender” at all? Some of us may believe that the very idea of maleness and femaleness make more trouble than they are worth. My answer to all of these questions is that, at least some of the time, at least some of us, should be trying to open up our gender-talk, listening anew for the Spirit’s melodies and harmonies and rhythms, even as we together discern how faithfully to speak truth in love.<sup>9</sup>

As a community, we should be sure to leave some space for minority reports, make some time to check out the other side of the street, turn down the bass so more treble comes through, turn down the treble so more bass comes through. And we should take particular care to listen for — and speak of — the bits of the music that are the hardest to hear.

I long for us to become better F/friends to one another, better F/friends, even wives, of Christ. Our collective Body suffers when our members fail to love one another, to tune in to one another, to love one another as we are loved by the One Who Loves us all. I wonder which is most difficult — I fail at them all — to love my neighbors and F/friends as myself, to love my enemies, or to love other people as God loves me. How much we all seem to resort to “fight or flight” rather than Waiting on the Lord, and Speaking to that of God within

Wisdom can be imag(in)ed as a woman, as in Proverbs 8 and echoed in John’s Gospel. Women and men and everyone in between and everyone on their way from one to the other can sit with Woman Wisdom, imagine being Woman-as-Wisdom, imagine being the scorners and fools who hate knowledge, imagine being present before time began, in the prologue to John’s Gospel with Word and Light and Wisdom and Way and Truth and Life. The metaphors pile up and synergize and harmonize and speak together and speak separately and

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oh, but if only we could each alone and all together tune in, listen inwardly, hear truly the Voice, and speak the truth of what we hear, in love.

Some years ago QRT published a themed issue, titled “Uses of Scripture by Early Friends.” I love Paul Anderson’s turn of phrase, describing Friends as “approaching the revelatory text expecting to be addressed by the divine voice.”<sup>10</sup> As Friends we hope to speak under the inspiration of the same Spirit that gave forth the Scriptures. Even as we understand God to be “beyond gender” nevertheless did God create us in God’s own image: male and female created he us.<sup>11</sup> May we approach the texts that we ourselves create in our own speaking, and our own listening, in all faithfulness to the divine Voice

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Rev 22:17, 20, “And the Spirit and the bride say, Come. And let him that heareth say, Come. And let him that is athirst come. And whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely.... He which testifieth these things saith, Surely I come quickly. Amen. Even so, come, Lord Jesus.” All Bible quotations from the KJV.
- 2 Richard Bauman, *Let Your Words Be Few: Symbolism of Speaking and Silence Among Seventeenth-Century Quakers*. Quaker Home Service, 1983.
- 3 Available online at <http://www.qhpress.org/texts/fell.html> and ESR’s Digital Quaker Collection <http://dqc.esr.earlham.edu>. All Fell quotations from the former.
- 4 “Metaphors are imaginative leaps across a distance - the best metaphors always giving both a shock and a shock of recognition.... A metaphor that has lost its shock (its ‘is not’ quality) loses as well its recognition possibilities (its ‘is’ quality), for the metaphor is no longer ‘heard’: it is taken to be a definition...” Sallie McFague, *Collected Readings*, Fortress Press, 2013, p.88; passage from *Models of God*, 1987. Lakoff and Johnson’s classic book *Metaphors We Live By* (University of Chicago Press, 1980) gives many and varied examples of the bodily physical basis of metaphorical language, and the ways a culture’s metaphors structure its experience and thoughts.
- 5 I use “hear” in the biblical sense, with connotations of attending to, appreciating, understanding, even obeying. We could paraphrase the *Shema Yisrael* (Hear, O Israel!) of Deut 5:1 quoted by Jesus in Mark 12:29 “Listen up, O Israel!”
- 6 use “new resonance” as analogous to the “new light” we seek in Bible reading, per the *Friendly Bible Study* method many Friends know: <http://www.read-the-bible.org/friendlybiblestudy.htm>
- 7 Song of Songs, the stories in Genesis of the patriarchs seeking wives, the book of Hosea, and such New Testament stories as the woman at the well (John 4) are all good places to start.
- 8 For a thought-provoking exploration of some of what we give up by no longer calling the human race Man, I highly recommend *The Language of Canaan and the Grammar of Feminism* by the late Church of the Brethren scholar Vernard Eller; print edition Eerdmans, 1982, and online at <http://www.hccentral.com/eller6/>.

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- 9 See Ephesians 4:15 and the bits just before and after, preferably in several translations including the KJV.
- 10 Editorial Essay, “Is There a Quaker Hermeneutic?” *Quaker Religious Thought* #97, Vol. 30, No. 3, p. 5.
- 11 Gen 1:27, paraphrased.