

Church of England to Explore Gender-neutral Terms for God - Women Clergy's Suggestions for Replacing 'Our Father'

By [Sharon Jagger](#)

Global Research, February 14, 2023

[The Conversation](#) 10 February 2023

Region: [Europe](#)

Theme: [Religion](#)

All Global Research articles can be read in 51 languages by activating the Translate Website button below the author's name (desktop version)

To receive Global Research's Daily Newsletter (selected articles), [click here](#).

Follow us on [Instagram](#) and [Twitter](#) and subscribe to our [Telegram Channel](#). Feel free to repost and share widely Global Research articles.

The [Church of England](#) has announced it will explore alternative words to describe God, after some clergy asked to use more inclusive language in services.

The dominance of masculine language for God certainly matters. As feminist theologian [Mary Daly](#) wrote: "If God is male, the male is god". In other words, talking about the Christian God in exclusively masculine terms privileges men in society and underpins male dominance.

According to a Church spokesperson, the [official Christian doctrine](#) is that God has no gender. Yet "He" is described almost exclusively in masculine terms. And since the Church continues to struggle with issues of [gender equality](#), this project is likely to be contentious.

Critics will see this as an attempt to undo the long Christian tradition of calling God "He" and "Father". But feminine language and imagery has also been part of Church history.

[Hildegard of Bingen](#), a respected abbess (also known as a mother superior) in the Middle Ages, imagined the feminine side of God in her artistry and writings. And in the 1300s, female mystic [Julian of Norwich](#) spoke of the motherhood of God.

Modern feminist commentators such as [Mary Daly](#) and [Joan Engelsman](#), have argued that God in feminine form has been strategically written out of Christian history.

Initial reports indicate the Church's project will explore gender-neutral terminology - "Parent" instead of "Father". But there have been other recent proposals to use feminine language like "She".

When [Libby Lane](#) was appointed the Church of England's first female bishop in 2014, she

called for the mainstream acceptance of feminine names and pronouns for God.

At the same time, the chair of [Women and the Church](#), a group that advocates for gender equality in the Church, [stated](#) that the introduction of female bishops would impact women's lives in the Church "only if God is she as often as she is he – because this is such a formative aspect of our church life, and a real bastion of sexism". [Rachel Treweek](#), consecrated as bishop in 2015, joined the debate by arguing for the elimination of all gendered pronouns for God.

A genderless 'Father'?

[In my research](#) with women clergy, there are clues that some might be unsettled by moves away from traditional masculine language. One woman vicar described how in a bible study "all hell broke out" at the suggestion that the Lord's Prayer could begin with "Our Mother".

The more gender-neutral "Parent" worries [Rev Ian Paul](#), who has commented that such words are not interchangeable and have different meanings. The way words collect gendered meaning is, of course, part of the problem. Feminist theologian [Rosemary Radford Ruether](#) argues that even words that seem neutral are not – "God" conjures male imagery.

Complicating this further, I found that sometimes masculine words are forced to mean both male and female. This is awkward and ultimately unsatisfactory. One woman priest, for example, told me that she sees "Father" as the only way of describing God, but "it might be that ideas about fatherhood need to change".

Another interviewee told me she sees the term "Father" to include male and female. These complications around language and gender suggest that a project exploring gender-neutral language will need to think deeply about what constitutes "neutral".

Exploring other names for God

While my research suggests there is an attachment to words such as "Father" among some women clergy, several interviewees told me they tried to avoid any gendered language for God. Some mentioned "Godself" as a possible candidate to replace masculine pronouns. One woman told me:

Where I heard 'Godself' being used, I quite like that. That is a suggested way. Again, at the moment ... [but] within the parishes I think it would draw attention when it's not necessarily what you want them to focus on.

There's a sense here that some congregations may not be willing to embrace language change, even if there is a desire among clergy.

The project to look at gender-neutral language to describe God is, at the very least, a recognition that the dominance of masculine language is a problem. Many would welcome the possibility of worshipping in Church without the constant references to "He" and "Father", given that God is supposed to be beyond gender. A reform of patriarchal language may open the door to tackling other social injustices. Perhaps we are witnessing a sea change in the Church.

But right now the Church of England's inclusivity credentials are in tatters. It has problems with [institutional racism](#), there is [gender inequality](#) in the priesthood and after years of

discussion, [same-sex marriage](#) is still not recognised. Given the institution's record on equality, any radical change coming out of this project would be quite miraculous.

*

Note to readers: Please click the share buttons above. Follow us on Instagram and Twitter and subscribe to our Telegram Channel. Feel free to repost and share widely Global Research articles.

[Sharon Jagger](#) is a Lecturer in Religion, York St John University.

Featured image is from [Puwadon Sang/Shutterstock](#)

The original source of this article is [The Conversation](#)
Copyright © [Sharon Jagger](#), [The Conversation](#), 2023

[Comment on Global Research Articles on our Facebook page](#)

[Become a Member of Global Research](#)

Articles by: [Sharon Jagger](#)

Disclaimer: The contents of this article are of sole responsibility of the author(s). The Centre for Research on Globalization will not be responsible for any inaccurate or incorrect statement in this article. The Centre of Research on Globalization grants permission to cross-post Global Research articles on community internet sites as long the source and copyright are acknowledged together with a hyperlink to the original Global Research article. For publication of Global Research articles in print or other forms including commercial internet sites, contact: publications@globalresearch.ca

www.globalresearch.ca contains copyrighted material the use of which has not always been specifically authorized by the copyright owner. We are making such material available to our readers under the provisions of "fair use" in an effort to advance a better understanding of political, economic and social issues. The material on this site is distributed without profit to those who have expressed a prior interest in receiving it for research and educational purposes. If you wish to use copyrighted material for purposes other than "fair use" you must request permission from the copyright owner.

For media inquiries: publications@globalresearch.ca