

October 16, 1983

In yesterday's New York Times there was a story about a new rendition of scripture which has been developed by an ecumenical committee with the objective of eliminating the sexist vocabulary employed in traditional versions. This newly developed text, rather than referring to God as the "Father of Mankind," speaks, for example, of the Creator as "the Father and Mother of Humankind." Jesus Christ is referred to as the "Child" of God, rather than as the Son of God. The newspaper presented by way of illustration several famous passages with the old and the new versions printed side by side.

In reading these illustrations it certainly seemed that in the newer rendition a certain burden had been lifted from the text with the elimination of the exclusionist vocabulary. At the same time, it also seemed that the revisions had a disabling impact on the poetic dimensions of the text, much as if the personal pronouns in passages of Shakespeare were replaced by "he, she, or it."

Reading about this effort to develop a scripture which is inclusive in the connotations of its words reminds me of the first time I read a certain passage in the Tao Te Ching, the sacred text of the Taoist faith, which reminded me of the opening passages in the gospel of John. According to the Taoist text:

Something there is whose veiled creation was before the earth
and the sky began to be. So aloof and so alone, it is, nevertheless,
the Mother of all things, and in silence it remains ever-
lastingly loving to all.

I remember being struck by the beauty and naturalness of the feminine metaphor for the Creator. At the same time, I was troubled by the description of a divine agent as being "so aloof and alone."

Perhaps the lesson of all this is that when it comes to truly important things—great joy, deep grief, or the apprehension of spiritual truth—words usually fail us in some way. With respect to such ultimate things, our vocabulary is like a finger pointing in the direction of a journey. Words start us out in an approximately correct direction, but the journey must be completed in silence, without their aid, if we are to achieve the destination we seek.