

## Holy Week Conference 2005

### Why Byzantium and Ethiopia? And other cultural issues

By *Richard Fabian*

The very word “Byzantine” was coined in mid 19<sup>th</sup> century. Liturgical scholars object that it obscures complex relation of Jerusalem, Syria, Constantinople, Egypt, Ethiopia, Central Asia, India, Russia and Ukrainian rites.

Constantinople was the political and economic center of the late Roman world, typically receiving Syrian worship practices and sending them abroad eastward and westward. (Rome resisted these imports; Egypt, Britain and Spain welcomed them more.) Christianity was overwhelmingly an eastern religion, with a western European extension. The largest medieval church, both in geography and in numbers, was the Church of the East, spread through India and across Central Asia to Beijing (Their last Patriarch in Baghdad was a Chinese monk.) Military events changed that. Tamerlane converted to Islam, and converted Christians and Buddhists at swordpoint. Then Crusaders from the west sacked Constantinople on their way to Jerusalem, and the richest capital city of Europe never recovered. Today westerners read medieval history without mentioning Constantinople, the way people might read a Guatemalan writer’s history of the western hemisphere that never mentioned the United States!

Our renaissance reformers meant to recover that lost connection, despite their limited resources then. Luther during debates about Eucharistic presence: “What we believe is no different from what the Greeks and Russians believe.”

Massey Shepherd on the only thing that distinguishes Anglican liturgy: every successive Book of Common Prayer ever published from around the world represents a significant step eastward—not to Rome but to Syria and Constantinople. St Gregory’s is just the most Anglican church in San Francisco.

The great Belgian scholar Paul Leclercq thinks that St Gregory’s liturgy suits San Francisco, and therefore won’t travel elsewhere. I hope he’s right, because blue jeans started in San Francisco, and now everyone in Belgium wears them.

At St Gregory’s we mean to make people aware of God’s conversation with all humanity, as Christians understand that conversation. Means making both Jewish and eastern Christian elements more obvious. First, to make clear that this IS ONE conversation. Second, to profit from the experience of other congregations with participatory worship.

Today scholarly focus on eastern rites, by both Christians and Jews.

1. These are a historical storehouse. Jewish scholar at NAAL: we’re not going to get any further in recovering early synagogue ritual until we unlock the Byzantine rite, because that’s where all the evidence is.

2. Also a long, almost unbroken tradition of vernacular worship.
3. Also untouched by Roman policy of suppressing local variants, which suppressed creativity in France and Germany, and to a lesser extent in Spain and Britain. (Gregory the Great's instructions to Augustine disregarded.)

Today many eastern rites are undergoing renewal/reform like western. Started early XX in Greece and Russia until national politics interrupted. Now starting in Ethiopia too. Ethiopia is a special case. Ethiopian Orthodox Church is by far the largest eastern church today, bigger than Russia or Greece, even with their American diaspora. Very popular. You'll hear more from John Ball about our pilgrimage last year to Lalibela for the biggest outdoor festival of the year. I want to underscore the Ethiopian church's amazing appeal to youth. Every young Ethiopian villager learns from their priest to read and write; most boys get ordained deacons; boys and girls now share the dances at every liturgy. The outside of cathedrals lined up with young men praying and lighting candles; courtyards full of young men and women drumming and singing and dancing.

[My visit on one Sunday to both extremes of the black American experience: Glide Memorial Methodist Church in San Francisco; and the Ethiopian Orthodox parish in Berkeley. Glide was a perfectly designed showpiece, excellently suited to their target audience—audience is the best term here—and deliberately lean on Christian doctrine. The Ethiopian service was: totally participatory; and totally orthodox Christian in the small “o” sense, and full of divine names!—whereas by contrast, Hispanic folk worship offers us rich mixtures of Aztec and Mayan and Yoruba religion, with genuine theological problems.]

TWO OTHER CULTURAL ISSUES THAT SURFACED DURING QUESTION TIME YESTERDAY, and I may take a moment to fit them in here.

1. Jewish usage.

We emphasize what Jews and Christians share. Building layout like a 4<sup>th</sup> century synagogue; *Shema*. Most Jewish visitors say they like this welcoming approach, but a few have taken offense. Taking offense is so strong an issue in modern Judaism that a Christian dare not judge it. (*Das Schul' nicht gehe!*)

One questioner yesterday felt surprised and maybe offended at hearing the name “Yahweh” read out in the OT reading. I agree that's a problematic practice, but for a quite different reason: it worries me that untutored people will find it needlessly unintelligible, and generally speaking, we use plain English translations for everything except some choir anthems. You may hear the name “Yahweh” read here when the Jerusalem Bible translation is used, though we normally prompt the reader to English it.

XX Century Jewish usage on this point is diverse. Some Jews insist on using the full pronunciation, even though that is conjectural, for 2 reasons:

a. Prohibition is not scriptural. Scripture shows the name was regular part of Temple worship.

b. Prohibition is a classical taboo, and these Jews think modern Judaism must reject taboos.

History of taboo (a Polynesian word now broadly used in religious analysis): what is originally held sacred for people to touch at proper times then becomes too sacred for most people to touch at most times, and finally too sacred for anyone to touch ever (“unclean”). Blood for example.

Despite Paul’s New Testament treatment of the Law’s restrictions, many Christians east and west have appropriated Jewish taboos partially. For example, an Ethiopian Orthodox woman won’t enter church during her period. Or laypeople may not stand where a priest stands, or say what a priest says, in imitation of bygone Temple restrictions.

But be sure you know what the taboos are if you’re going to keep them. Orthodox Jews hold that the taboo on God’s name applies to English as well as Hebrew: pupils in orthodox and many conservative Jewish schools learn to write “G-d” instead, and encounter a shock when they enter secular universities. If you spell “God” with an O in the middle, you have already broken the taboo. Cheeseburgers are likewise forbidden for kosher diners, though not mentioned Hebrew scripture. Some Jews keep this taboo, others don’t; you’re free to do as you like. But if you think you can rank some taboos above others, no orthodox rabbi will support you. Anyway, they’re much more upset about Jews who use the name of God than about gentiles, to whom these traditions don’t apply.

At SGN we ignore many taboos, some dear to other Christians. For example, we direct laypeople to read all readings, including gospel, and to stand anywhere around the altar Table, and to sing along with the presider, and to communicate without attending sacramental confession beforehand—all of which are forbidden in the Russian and Greek churches.

## 2. Inclusive language and inclusive ministry.

The icon behind our presider’s throne. Gregory of Nyssa commenting on the Song of Songs: Christ marries your soul, and the bride’s mother-in-law blessing the union represents God, because God has no gender so a woman is a perfectly good symbol for God.

Patriarchy a real political and social problem all over the world. Mao Zidong’s vision (“Women hold up half the sky!”) hasn’t triumphed even in communist China, where women still hold up far more than their half.

Ministry: women serve equally on a rota here with men. Deacons are equal to presbyters, and our one ordained deacon who is not also ordained a presbyter is a woman. Presider this past Sunday at 19:30 was woman. Presider at our first Easter in 1978 was a woman, while I was deacon—she tells us we were the first church in 1600 years to have a woman preside at the main Easter service. (Deacon is my own favorite job in the liturgy.)

Linguistically, there is no standard yet. Yesterday one woman wondered why she heard masculine pronouns; another woman said she heard plenty of feminine imagery: that disagreement about standards typifies our experience. Let me outline how we proceed here.

R.A. Norris defines the problem: not that women have been excluded from Christian worship, but that they have been silenced. Our task is to make women show up and speak up the way men do. We try everything; most techniques get a try and a hearing here. Changing pronouns where that makes sense, for example. That's especially useful for iconoclastic spiritual reasons—though that effect is probably temporary.

We do keep two limits:

- a. We do not use the so-called “economic trinity:” a theological critical principle. Gregory of Nyssa and the other Cappadocians insisted that all three persons do all the works (creating, redeeming, sanctifying). Maybe that sounds more difficult to grasp, but it is more faithful to the OT editors, who scrupulously adapted images—including some polytheist images—to serve monotheism. Cappadocian image for the Trinity is *perichoresis*—circle dancing, where the dancers may take turns leading but all the dancers do the same step at the same time.
- b. We do not suppress masculine imagery in the liturgy, but add feminine imagery to complement it, though this is a slow process. Where one hymn line may call God “he,” the following line says “she.” One of our musical Eucharistic settings says “mothering father,” another has people sing both nouns at once.

Patriarchy is a serious political and social issue. But my experience says the greater challenge for handling scriptural family language in modern prayers and hymns arises from another cultural gap. When scripture calls God “father” we post-Freudians think automatically about analogies to our own male parent. But scripture almost never appeals to the experience of having a parent—scripture appeals to the experience of being a parent, especially a parent with disobedient children that you have to correct, even though you love them. Every parent here today knows what that's like. But liturgists generally don't know, and are deaf to this scriptural language. That's because apart from fundamentalists—who do theology and liturgy totally outside discussion with us—today's liturgists and scripture interpreters are overwhelmingly childless. Nuns and gay men like myself predominate. They do not readily hear what scripture expects them to hear; so they do not employ scriptural images for parents with children to recognize and

use in worship. Updated Roman Catholic service texts suffer extensively from this deafness; and mainline Protestant liturgists have caught it by contagion, despite our married and parenting clergy.

For example, hear my frustrating experience at a recent Societas Liturgica Congress with a leading Roman Catholic woman scholar whose excellent work normally deserves reading, and I commend it to you. Responding from the floor to her paper on gender issues in worship, I observed that nearly half the women in our parishes are mothers of male children; yet many feminist translations and teachers methodically exclude males, thereby erasing these women's experience. Gender-aware parish clergy urgently need models and language we can use in our congregations that include so many mothers of boys. The scholar dismissed my request, saying that my own opinion was obvious, so she need not answer; instead, she welcomed and answered the usual politically correct (i.e., flattering) questions from male "feminist" professors in the crowd.

Again, my dear old friend Germaine Greer, a sometime feminist icon, surprised everyone when she decided she preferred to see men to act like men—so she liked Texan men best! That cost her her "feminist" credentials in some eyes; but of course there is no standard here.

If you want fine feminist liturgical writing, look to the Methodist Ruth Duck! The best English language hymn-writer today: effortless and wondrous rich imagery. She has just handed me a new liturgical Eucharistic hymn I'll ask our composers to set.