PRONOUNS FOR GOD

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If someone doesn't know how languages work, THEY should probably not pontificate on the subject.
Category: Observations

Recently, Christianity Today published an article by someone called Christy Thornton which addressed the question of using "they" as a singular pronoun for God. If you are looking for a balanced, weighing up of the arguments on a complex linguistic and cultural phenomenon, then this isn't the place to turn to. Thornton makes no attempt to see the broader picture and makes it very plain where she stands.

> *Introducing a nongendered, personal, singular pronoun into our theological discourse isnâ€™t orthodox, in my opinion.*

That's a very strong statement and one which immediately condemns Christians across the world as non-orthodox. Let me explain. English and many other languages make a distinction in the third person singular between masculine and feminine (he and she). However, there are many other languages which do not make this distinction. In Kouya, there are two third person singular pronouns; "É"" which refers to humans (he, she or they) and "we" which refers to non-humans (it). So, in Kouya you don't use different words for he and she, but you do use different words for a person and a table, or an elephant. Kouya speakers have to use a non-gendered pronoun for God and that apparently renders them non-orthodox. I've no idea how many other people are in the same boat, but it will be billions. Perhaps, there is a flaw in this reasoning.

One of my regular complaints is that Western theologians behave as though they are the ones who determine what is and what is not correct for the rest of the world. This is a perfect example of that tendency:

> *There is no such thing as a nongendered human and therefore no need to use a nongendered pronoun in reference to a person.*

Excuse me? Kouya speakers would profoundly disagree? They get by perfectly happily using nongendered pronoun for people and don't need to change.

Across the world's languages, things get even more complicated. Languages such as French have grammatical gender which does not have a one-to-one relationship with biological gender (a table is not inherently female). In these situations it may be perfectly acceptable (and indeed grammatically essential) to refer to people using pronouns and articles which do not normally apply to their

biological gender. Rather than just have two or three (masculine, feminine and neuter) genders, some languages have multiple noun-classes and men and women may be in the same class or may be differentiated according to all sorts of criteria other than gender. The Dyirbal language of Australia has a noun class that includes women, water, fire and violence. This has nothing to do with biological gender, but seems to be related to the concept of danger.

Gender is just one of many ways to differentiate between people and objects, the world's languages are far richer and more diverse than Thornton seems to have grasped. Rather than imposing our own view of English grammar on the rest of the world, we would do well to learn from them about what is and what is not possible.

So let's look specifically at English.

> *At present one of the liveliest language debates in our culture centers on personal pronouns. As a part of that conversation, some groups are expanding the semantic range of they to include a singular subject rather than only a plural subjectâ€"a linguistic leap previously nonexistent in the English language.*

"A linguistic leap previously nonexistent in the English language." Let's fact check that, shall we? The Oxford English Dictionary has this to say.

> *The Oxford English Dictionary traces singular they back to 1375, where it appears in the medieval romance William and the Werewolf. Except for the old-style language of that poem, its use of singular they to refer to an unnamed person seems very modern. Hereâ€™s the Middle English version: â€˜Hastely hiÈ ed eche . . . Ã¾ei neyÈ Ã¾ed so neiÈ h . . . Ã¾ere william & his worÃ¾i lef were liand i-fere.â€™ In modern English, thatâ€™s: â€˜Each man hurried . . . till they drew near . . . where William and his darling were lying together.â€™*
>
> *https://public.oed.com/blog/a-brief-history-of-singular-they/*

So that is previously non-existent before 1375!

Although *they* has a long history of being used as a singular pronoun, it fell out of fashion because "educated" people thought that it was wrong because you can't use plural pronouns in this way in

Latin. This imposition of Latin grammar on English has led to similar prohibitions such as not splitting infinitives and not ending sentences with prepositions, things forbidden in Latin but perfectly normal in English. What is interesting is that the people who get aerated about using *they* in the singular, don't have the same problem with *you*, a similarly plural pronoun which is now almost universally used in the singular too. (In passing, I would suggest that losing the distinction between you-singular and you-plural in English is of far greater theological and pastoral significance than what pronoun we use for God). The thing is, if you are going to insist that we don't use the plural pronoun *they* for God, then consistency means that you should also insist that we refer to God as *thou*.

The English language is evolving as all languages do. For a variety of reasons, singular *they* (which has a 650 year history) is becoming more common and squeezing out the singular pronouns in the same way that *you* replaced *thou*. Whether the transition will be a complete one, only time will tell. In the meantime, my own preference is to use *he* for God, but *they* is also perfectly grammatical. To insist, as Thornton does, that you must only use masculine pronouns and to do otherwise is unorthodox, is plainly nonsensical in the light of the way that language works around the world.

Let's revisit Kouya in closing. As I mentioned, they have two singular third-person pronouns; "É"" for human referents and "we" for non-human ones. Which of these should be used for God? Well, in the case of the incarnate Jesus, it was clearly "É"". The same was true of God the Father. However, when we came to the Holy Spirit, Kouya speakers insisted that we had to use the pronoun "we". Now, I wanted to argue that the unity of the Godhead meant that we should use the same pronoun throughout, but my Kouya colleagues argued that using "É"" for the Spirit sounded wrong and didn't make sense. In the end, we went with their natural intuition for the language. **There would have been something very ugly about people telling them how their language should work.** Those of us who are more advanced in years and who prefer our version of English to the emergent varieties that younger people use, would do well to remember this principle.

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