

# Towards Inclusive, Bias-Free Language

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## Abstract

One of the shifts we are witnessing is an increased awareness of the need to be inclusive in our language as we work to heal cleavages and demonstrate right human relations. As writers, we may be open to the use of bias-free language but unfamiliar with the forms of bias and options for addressing them. As esotericists, we are aware that the language we use is powerful. This article identifies ways in which bias is commonly reflected in esoteric literature and provides practical examples of alternatives.

## The Importance of Bias-Free Language

The early work of Benjamin Lee Whorf and Edward Sapir on linguistic relativity, later known collectively as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, was instrumental in focusing attention on the role played by language in shaping how we view the world.<sup>1</sup> More recent research on the impact of language on behavior began with the now-famous study by Sandra Bem in the early 1970s showing that adults handled and spoke to an infant differently based on whether they were told it was a boy or a girl.<sup>2</sup> Both the American Psychological Association and the American Philosophical Association have determined that there is enough evidence of the negative impact of non-inclusive language that they have published professional guidelines on bias-free language.

For esotericists, the matter of language has particular relevance. We know that “energy follows thought” and so we need to be careful of the thoughts we form, which are shaped by the language (spoken or unspoken) that we use:

In physical plane manifestation, we are known by our speech; we are known by our reticence, by the things we say, and by the things we leave unsaid, and are judged by the quality of our conversation...Through speech a thought is evoked and becomes present; it is brought out of abstraction and out of a nebulous condition and materialized upon the physical plane, producing (could we but see it) something very definite on etheric levels. Objective manifestation is produced, for “Things are that which the Word makes them in naming them.” Speech is literally a great magical force.<sup>3</sup>

## Transforming Gender-Specific Language

All languages evolve over time, and one of the ways in which English has evolved is in the role that gender plays in determining how personal and relative pronouns are assigned. Old English was similar to modern French and German in that every noun was assigned to a grammatical gender class (masculine, feminine, neuter), and adjectives and pronouns related to the noun had to agree in gender.<sup>4</sup> The gender-specific third-person singular personal pronouns (“he,” “she”) are our current remnant of this older linguistic system.

Whereas up until recently it was still commonly-accepted practice to use gender-specific language in writing, both *The Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* and *The Chicago Manual of Style* now have specific editing directives on the use of bias-free language. Writing in a bias-free manner with regard to gender bias has received particular attention both because gender-specific language is so pervasive and because scholarly research over the past 35 years has demonstrated repeatedly the negative psychological impact of gender-specific language and the insidious effects of gender bias on the attitudes and actions of persons even when they are alert to that bias. As a result, the American Psychological Association has taken a particularly strong position on the importance of gender neutrality.

When attention first focused on the negative effects of gender-specific language in the 1970s,<sup>5</sup> early attempts to rectify those effects resulted in awkward and unpopular constructions such as “s/he” or “he and she.” Gradually we have realized that English is a very flexible language and we actually have lots of inclusive alternatives from which to choose. In relation to esoteric writing, there are three types of language usage that can create unintended mental bias: (a) third-person pronouns, (b) gender-specific terminology referring to humans, and (c) gender-specific terminology for discarnate entities. Learning to write without such biases takes persistent practice and experimentation. We can help move our spiritual evolution forward by shifting to gender-neutral terminology, as illustrated below.

### **Third-Person Pronouns**

The most common problem we encounter in trying to write using gender neutral language is the frequent use of the masculine third-person pronoun (“he”) when referring to an individual of unspecified gender. Using language familiar to the esoteric community, four possible alternative constructions are illustrated below. (A fifth alternative, though less frequently used, is to rewrite the sentence in the passive voice.) The first two options demonstrate modifications to the following text:

*Original wording:*

An aspirant may seek to serve, but he often overestimates his experience and regards himself as unique.<sup>6</sup>

1. Use a plural, rather than a singular, noun.

*Aspirants may seek to serve, but they often overestimate their experience and regard themselves as unique.*

2. Substitute a first- or second-person pronoun for a gender-specific third-person pronoun.

*As aspirants, we may seek to serve, but often overestimate our experience and regard ourselves as unique.*

An additional two options are illustrated using modifications to the following text:

*Original wording:*

The disciple stands firm at this point of tension, and his first step is to ascertain on what plane it is to be found.<sup>7</sup>

3. Substitute articles (“a,” “an,” “the”) for “he.”

*The disciple stands firm at this point of tension, and the first step is to ascertain on what plane it is to be found.*

4. Revise the sentence structure so that a pronoun is no longer needed.

*The disciple stands firm at this point of tension, first ascertaining on what plane it is to be found.*

### **Gender-Specific Terminology Referring to Humans**

In addition to the issue of gender-specific pronouns, there are many nouns in common usage that are inappropriately gender specific as they, in fact, refer to both women and men. Using a masculine referent has the effect, over time, of limiting our awareness to a single gender. Table 1 provides suggestions of alternate gender-neutral terms that we can substitute for gender-specific nouns frequently found in esoteric literature.

### **Gender-Specific Terminology Referring to Discarnate Entities**

While there may on occasion be a rationale for using gender-specific terminology in reference to particular humans (e.g., “David...he” or “Mary...she”), no such rationale can be applied when referring to

discarnate entities. These are energetic beings, not persons in physical, gendered bodies. The historical practice of referring to entities such as God, Sanat Kumara, the Planetary Logos, or even the Soul as “He” distorts our thinking, encourages us to anthropomorphize such Beings, and reinforces an assumption of spiritual authority as male.

**Table 1: List of Equivalent Terms for Human Referents**

<b>Gender-Specific Term</b>	<b>Alternate Gender-Neutral Term</b>
Brother(s)	Colleague(s)
Man	Individual, person
Manhood	Adulthood
Mankind	Humanity, human beings, people
Son of Man	Humanity, colleague, individual, person
Sons of Man	Humanity, human beings, people

When referring to spiritual constructs or beings, we encounter issues related to both the nouns we select and the pronouns we use. The former can best be addressed through the substitution of a gender-neutral noun, such as in the examples given in Table 2. Regarding pronouns, the appropriate singular pronoun to use would be “It” (or “Its”) – i.e., neuter. We need to be particularly alert to the use of gender-specific terminology and imagery in similes and allegories, where the terminology used may evoke a gendered image but in fact refers to an energetic non-gendered entity.

**Table 2: List of Equivalent Terms for Discarnate Entities**

<b>Gender-Specific Term</b>	<b>Alternate Gender-Neutral Term</b>
Father	<i>depending on the context:</i> Monad Spirit Will
Heavenly Man	Planetary Logos
Lord of the World	Sanat Kumara
Mother	<i>depending on the context:</i> Matter Active Intelligence
Son	Soul
Son of God	Solar angel
Son of Mind	Soul

### **Addressing Other Forms of Bias**

There are other forms of bias that we encounter in the esoteric literature. Uta Gabay<sup>8</sup> has been especially articulate about both the importance and the challenge of moving beyond old Piscean ideals: “The attachment to words is a common thing, which holds true for esoteric students as well. Words to which we have become accustomed, especially if they have been in use for a very long time, have a mantric value. They are evocative.” The Tibetan, too, warns us that paternalism, for example, is rooted in a Piscean, not Aquarian, ideal.<sup>9</sup>

Gabay has pointed out further that “the barrier of language is a fatal one...The safest way to make the esoteric teaching available is to translate the spiritual concepts as much as possible into the language of energy and science...Scientific language is universal because it is created by humanity as a whole. We are only at the very beginning of this process. It is far from being comprehensive, and it is not satisfying emo-

tionally; it has no evocative appeal. Yet it would lighten our load if all terminology would be along the Fifth Ray line.”

She makes a particular plea for moving away from the use of “Christ” when referring to the Avatar to come as the term activates resistance in people from non-Christian traditions. The use of more neutral terms, such as “the World Teacher” or “the Coming One,” is more inclusive and bias-free. The challenge this creates can be illustrated, as she points out, by noting any resistance we may have to replacing the word “Christ” with “the Coming One” in the Great Invocation.

## Dealing with Quotations from Published Works

Important esoteric works (by Bailey, Blavatsky, and Holmes, to name a few), to which we refer frequently, were written over 50 years ago when the use of gender-specific language was commonly accepted. Traditional practice is that copyrighted works are to be quoted exactly as they were published; however, continuing to quote gender-specific language and imagery reinforces exactly the types of objectification and separateness that we, as disciples, are committed to reversing.

With reference to the Blue Books in particular (as they are so frequently quoted by esoteric writers), it is helpful to keep in mind that they represent Alice Bailey’s rendering (in the language of her time) of the ideas of the Tibetan, who warned both against taking concepts literally rather than allegorically and that language could distort ideas. We are always being cautioned to reflect on the idea behind the words rather than on the specific words themselves (unless a specific term has been emphasized for teaching purposes). Indeed, the Tibetan himself urges us to use “free,” rather than literal, translations of older manuscripts: “Again, we have a free, rather than a literal translation, and in this the true sense of the archaic terms used is preserved instead of academic correctness.”<sup>10</sup>

In addition to the option alluded to by the Tibetan of editing Blue Book quotes to provide that “free translation,” there are at least three approaches to the use of quotations that can eliminate the need to include gender-specific language in current writing. Their application is illustrated in connection with the following quote from *Glamour*<sup>11</sup>:

*Original wording:*

“The disciple...seizes upon the idea and attempts to integrate it into his plans, and tries to work with energies for which he is not temperamentally suited.”

1. Select quotations that do not contain gender-specific language (e.g., the concept is stated in the plural)

The following passage, which expresses a similar concept in gender-neutral language is found further down the same paragraph:

*“Many good disciples...seize upon every idea that comes their way and use no discrimination of any kind.”*

2. Use partial quotes so that you can substitute gender-neutral language for the problematic terminology but still quote the core idea with attribution, as in:

*We often “seize upon the idea and attempt to integrate it” into our plans and so end up trying to “work with energies” for which we are not really suited by temperament.*

3. Paraphrase the concept so that you can express it in gender-neutral language while still giving attribution to the original source of the concept.

*We often take ideas and try to fit them into our plans without exploring the consequences and determining if they fit with our temperament.*

## Conclusion

“A first step for the Ageless Wisdom community is to become aware that we, too, have our religiosity, our own Piscean need and conditioning. To acknowledge this – to ourselves and to others – goes a long way towards true universality. Apart from the effort to transform the Piscean mystical language into an Aquarian universal language, a kind of update is needed here. We must recognize and acknowledge that this material was written at a certain time and for a certain audience. We must ask ourselves where we stand today and what is expected of us in taking the teaching further into the New Age.”<sup>12</sup>

As public support for bias-free language grows, we have an opportunity to contribute to the movement towards increased inclusiveness through the language that we choose to use in esoteric writing and speaking. Further resources on options for inclusive language are available at <http://www.servicegrowth.net> / Changing attitudes / Language.

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<sup>1</sup> See Edward Sapir, *Language* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World, 1921); Benjamin Lee Whorf, *Language, Thought, and Reality: Selected Writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf*, ed. John B. Carroll (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1956).

<sup>2</sup> Sandra L. Bem, “The measurement of psychological androgyny,” *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 1974, 42:155-62.

<sup>3</sup> Alice A. Bailey, *A Treatise on Cosmic Fire* (New York: Lucis Publishing, 1925), 980-981.

<sup>4</sup> Rodney Huddleston and Geoffrey K. Pullum, *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Dorothy I. Riddle, “Language and Unity,” *Sharing*, Summer 1974, 10-11; Robin Lakoff, *Language and Woman’s Place* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975); Casey Miller and Kate Swift, *Words and Women: New Language in New Times* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1977).

<sup>6</sup> Based on text in Alice A. Bailey, *Glamour: A World Problem* (New York: Lucis Publishing, 1950), 52.

<sup>7</sup> Based on text in Bailey, *Glamour*, 263.

<sup>8</sup> The following quotations are taken from Uta Gabay’s talk, “Invoking the Aquarian Christ in Jerusalem,” given at the Annual Conference of the Seven Ray Institute on April 7, 2006.

<sup>9</sup> Alice A. Bailey, *Education in the New Age* (New York: Lucis Publishing, 1954), 119-120.

<sup>10</sup> Alice A. Bailey, *The Light of the Soul* (New York: Lucis Publishing, 1927), 339.

<sup>11</sup> Bailey, *Glamour*, 63.

<sup>12</sup> Gabay, “Invoking the Aquarian Christ in Jerusalem.”