

## **RELIGION AS A SOCIALIZING FORCE IN THE “WOMAN QUESTION”\***

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

Religion is an important aspect in many people's lives. It tries to answer the existential questions that arise in every human heart: Why do I exist? Why is there suffering? Why do I have to die? What is the meaning of life? etc. It promises salvation, liberation, enlightenment in one form or the other. It is therefore appalling that this important aspect of human life can become oppressive. The essence and starting point of all religions is an EXPERIENCE of something tremendous, of some transcendence that is then interpreted as an experience of God. Such an experience cries out to be shared and soon the person who has the experience gathers disciples. A community is formed. Structures, rules of conduct and even a list of beliefs begin to develop. Some groups who claim closeness with the founder assume the power to interpret the founder's words, actions and mission. Soon there develops power relationships. As soon as such power relations appear, oppression becomes a possibility and then a reality.

This paper aims to describe the role of religion in women's lives, identifying the oppressive as well as the liberative

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elements that may co-exist. It will focus on Christianity, although its conclusions may be true of other institutionalized religions also.

## II. HERSTORY

Let me begin with a woman's story.

Linda is a helper in the kitchen of a seminar house. At the age of 13, she was seduced by a married man. To escape a court case filed by Linda's employer, the man persuaded her to come and live with him. Emma said that because she was no longer a virgin and felt that she had no future, she went and lived with him. He was so jealous that when he went out to work, he would lock her up in the house. She was pregnant with her second child when, in a fit of jealousy, he knocked her head on the floor so hard that she lost four of her front teeth. On another occasion, he threatened her with an air pistol that exploded, burying nine pellets in her thigh. Seven could be taken out by operation, but two remained embedded in her thigh bone. That was when she went to the Women's Crisis Center with her three children.

She had no permanent job, however, so when the man persuaded her to go back to him, she did. She never could refuse him when he wanted her, so at the age of 25, she had five children. She had to give away one of her children. She almost died during the birth of her fifth child. Later, she had a miscarriage. The question now is, at the age of 30, how many children would she have? And how in the world can she feed them?

Why did Linda feel she had to live with her seducer? How could she stay with him for such a long time? Much of Linda's actions or inactions will be clarified in a later part of this paper.

### **III. RELIGION AS A SOCIALIZING FACTOR IN THE WOMAN QUESTION**

By the "woman question" we mean the fact there is a subordination, discrimination, exploitation and oppression of women as women, varying in kinds and degree but cutting across class, race, creed, nationality. It is an ideological, a structural and a global question. It has been going on from one generation to the other because of three important socializing forces or institution, namely: education, religion and mass media. I will focus on this paper on the role of religion in the perpetuation of the "woman question."

#### **1. Women and the Bible**

Throughout the history of the Church until now the Bible has been used to justify the subordination and discrimination of women, and yet women, not men, are the most constant believers in the Bible or God's word.

First it has to be noted that the Bible was written in a patriarchal society. Although its authors are unknown, the books of the Bible have been attributed to men writers, have been interpreted by men, and have been taught for the last two thousand years by men.

In the monotheistic patriarchalism of the Hebrews, God was considered a patriarch. There was a pronounced male domination over women. It had a double standard of morality favorable to men. Women were considered properties of their fathers or husbands. The women's main contribution was bearing children. That was why to be barren was a curse. Needless to say, they were excluded from cultic participation except as spectators. They had to observe ritual purification for menstruation and childbirth.

The movement that Jesus of Nazareth initiated was a movement critical to the then prevailing Jewish society. Eliza-

beth Fiorenza writes:

As a renewal movement the Jesus movement stands in conflict with its Jewish society and is "heretical" with respect to the Jewish religious community. The earliest Jesus traditions expect a reversal of all social conditions through the eschatological intervention of God: this is initially realized in the ministry of Jesus. Therefore the Jesus movement can accept all those who according to contemporary social standards are marginal people and who are, according to the Torah, "unclean": the poor, the exploited, the public sinners, the publicans, the maimed and the sick, and last but not the least, the women. (Fiorenza 1979).

Therefore, it is not surprising that Jesus' treatment of women went against the accustomed attitude of the Jews. Jesus took women seriously and chose them as disciples and primary witnesses: for example, Mary Magdalene and three women who witnessed the empty tomb. He not only talked publicly with the Samaritan woman, he even engaged her in a theological discussion and revealed his mission to her. He was forgiving of the woman taken in adultery and put up the Syro-Phoenician woman as a model of faith. He gave his Mother, Mary, a significant role in his mission.

In the early Christian communities, the character of the Jesus movement found expression in the abolition of social distinction of class, religion, race, and gender. (Gal. 3:28) Gentiles, slaves, and women assumed leadership functions in the missionary activities. Prisca, for example, together with her husband Aquilles, played an important role equal to St. Paul's. So did Thecla Lydia, and other women who played prominent roles in the development of the early Christian communities.

Unfortunately, the egalitarian elements in the Jesus movement gradually got eliminated in what Florenza calls "ecclesiastical patriarchalization." This was a part of the "apologetic

development of cultural adaptation that was necessary because the early Christian missionary movement, like the Jesus movement in Palestine, was a countercultural conflict movement that undermined the patriarchal structure of the Graeco-Roman politeia."

This ecclesiastical patriarchalization led to the exclusion of women from church offices; women had to conform to their stereotyped role in patriarchal culture. It was no longer woman's call to discipleship that wrought out her salvation but her prescribed role as wife and mother.

In this patriarchal context, interpretations of Bible passages can really rationalize the subordination of women as for example the interpretation of the creation story where woman is taken from the rib of man. This has actually caused women to feel inferior because they are made to feel that they are only derived beings. The male is the important one and woman is just taken out of him. Secondly, woman seems to be created only for the sake of the man. She is made to feel that she has no significance in herself except in a relationship of service to a man. And worse still, she is made to feel guilty of the sin of man. She is supposed to be the seductive temptress that brings about the man's downfall.

## **2. Women in Church History**

The ecclesiastical patriarchalization went on relentlessly throughout Church history. The Fathers of the Church reacting against Gnosticism, which allowed the female principle in its concept of the godhead, became increasingly misogynistic in their writings. Tertullian, for example, lashed out against Gnostic women as "heretical, bold, and immodest because they presumed to prophesy, teach, exercise, and baptize." To him is attributed the harsh words addressing women:

Women, you ought to dress in mourning and rags, representing yourself as patients bathed in tears, redeeming thus the fault of having ruined the human race. You are the door of hell: you, finally, are the cause why Jesus Christ had to die.

Origen castrated himself because he believed marital relations lessened the efficacy of prayer. St. John Chrysostom blamed women for the sins of David and Solomon, and described women as a storehouse of spittle and phlegm. Augustine avowed: "I know nothing which brings the manly mind down from the height more than a woman's caresses and that joining of bodies without which one cannot have a wife." The doctors of the Church were no better. Thomas Aquinas considered women as "misbegotten males." Gracian propounded:

Different kinds of temptations make war on man in his various ages, some when he is young and others when he is old: but woman threatens him perpetually. Neither the youth, nor the adult, nor the old man, nor the wise nor the brave, nor even the saint is ever safe from woman.

Because of this there was a significant stress on vowed celibacy both for men and women. With the establishment of monasteries, a communal life of celibates with the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience took form. In time, convent life became circumscribed by the rules imposed by clerical authorities who are, of course, male. In the sixth century they prescribed the cloister of all nuns which was to be kept strictly.

In the Middle Ages there emerged a systematic persecution of charismatic women who were condemned as witches. In 1484 a tract was published entitled "Malleus Maleficarum" (The Hammer Against Witches), which was an anthology of the product of fevered imaginations regarding the alleged habits, characteristics and evil techniques of females given over to Satan. Between the 13th and 18th centuries, about a

million women including Joan of Arc were burned to death because they were deemed to be witches.

The Protestant Revolution that did a lot to promote the role of the laity failed to do the same for women. In fact by restraining devotion to Mary and by suppressing the convents, the Reformation removed several of women's safety valves. Even Martin Luther was ambivalent about women. He failed to see the sexism in biblical patriarchy. He still preached that the role of women was procreation and nurturing.

### 3. Women in Philippine Church History

The pre-Spanish Filipino society cannot be called matriarchal, but the Filipino women did enjoy equal status with the men. The *mujer indigena* received equal inheritance, her training was the same as her male counterpart. The wife enjoyed the same right as the husband in marriage including the right to divorce. She participated in managing the domestic economy as well as in agricultural production. She could be a "pact holder," which shows equality and political-leadership opportunities. She had a preeminent role in religious cult, being the priestess, *babaylan*, who offered sacrifices in all the important events celebrated by the community.

In the 16th century, Spain brought Christianity and Western civilization with its patriarchal society to the Philippines. The same misogynistic trend that was present in the Western Church was, of course, brought to the island, as shown in the following instruction to parish priests in the colony:

Woman is the most monstrous animal in the whole of nature, bad tempered, and worse spoken. To have this animal in the house is asking for trouble in the way of tattling, talebearing, malicious gossip, and controversies, for wherever a man is, it would seem to be impossible to have peace and quiet. However, even this might be tolerated if it were not for the danger of unchastity. Not only should the parish priest of Indians

abstain from employing any woman in his house, but he should not allow them to enter it, even if they are only paying a call.

The friars spared no effort to mold the Filipino women to the image and likeness of the Spanish women of the Iberian society of their time, where their lifestyle did not differ much from that of a contemplative nun of today. Schools for girls were established, and manuals for young girls were translated to the values, concept, and prescriptions of the friars ingrained in young girls. The cult of the Blessed Virgin Mary was introduced to complete their domestication. (There is of course a liberating way of honoring Mary.)

The product of this friar education was later personified in the sweet, shy, docile, and pious Maria Clara, the heroine of Jose Rizal's novel, *Noli Me Tangere*. Later on, during the Propaganda movement, the *ilustrados* who were trying to awaken the national consciousness of the people denounced the friars' exploitation of Filipino women and their domestication that Spanish religious education had effected.

#### **4. Women in the Church Today**

This section will have to treat separately the Protestant and the Catholic Churches. It will also discuss the matter taking into consideration the teachings, the practices, the structure, and the ritual of the Churches.

The Catholic Church still holds a conservative view of women. Church teachings on family life still emphasize the "obey your husband" dictum. It allows only the natural methods of family planning and has not lifted its ban on divorce. Many so called "happy" marriages are built on the subordination of the woman who simply keeps quiet "so there will be no trouble." In marital conflicts, confessors advise a too early reconciliation without serious analysis of the conflict. The wife almost always has the exclusive burden of keeping the



marriage intact and very often battered women just keep on staying in such a marriage so as not to have a "broken family."

Its moral theology still focuses on the "sins of the flesh" with a certain bias against women as "Eve the temptress." It offers the model of Mary as Virgin-Mother, which is difficult for Catholic women to emulate. The cult of virginity that prevails make women who lose their virginity not even through their own fault feel like garbage. Many prostituted women make a plunge into prostitution because they lost their virginity either through rape, or incest. The putting up of the ideal woman as one who is self-sacrificing, long suffering, patient, meek, etc. is actually a conditioning of a victim consciousness in women. No wonder there are so many women victims of violence.

In the liturgy, there is still a sexist tone addressing the assembly as "brethren," praying for the salvation of "mankind," and exhorting to love one's "fellowmen." The women are given minor roles in the liturgy, but they shoulder the more burdensome preparations behind the scenes and the "making order" after each celebration.

Although women are the most active in Church service functions and activities, they are deprived of participation in the major decision-making processes and are denied full ministry in the Church. Celibate priests continue, in fact, to make the rules and prescriptions governing marriage and family life. The structure is hierarchical and clerical, and women have no part in both. There is also the sad reality of sexual abuse and sexual harassment of women and children within the church which are not seriously confronted and the only solution is transfer of the erring clergy.

The structure of Protestant Churches is less hierarchical than that of the Roman Catholic Church. Bishops are elected and pastors are petitioned by the parishioners. There is nor-

mally a national conference where the laity is represented in the decision-making. In some Protestant denominations there is already ordination of women pastors and there are also already women bishops. However, in actual church practice there are still many things left to be desired. I will let Protestant women speak for themselves. Ruth Kao writes:

There is a Women's Department Secretary working in the main assembly of the Church. In the local Church we have women deaconesses and for about fifty years we have had women ministers. But there are very few women in the decision-making bodies of the Presbytery or the Assembly. But we are now educating ourselves to be more self-reliant and to encourage our women to take part in these activities. (Ruth Kao 1986).

Saramma Jacob of the Syrian Orthodox Church of India pinpoints the problems of women in her Church:

Women in our Church have two urgent problems. They are: 1) to have voting rights in the Church, 2) to be admitted to theological seminaries. Though women are faithful in worship, they do not have equal rights with men in the Church. Men believe that they represent women as well. Regarding entering seminaries, there is a belief that women do not need theology (Saramma Jacob 1986).

Cynthia Lam, women's secretary of the Hongkong Christian Council, laments:

In the Church, women play a traditional role, preparing Holy Communion. Women's opinions are not respected. They are not taken into consideration. Women are expected to be obedient to the leaders and not to speak up. But it is the women who teach Sunday school, prepare the worship, and do home visitations. Although there are more men than women in most congregations, there are more men than women in decision-making bodies. So in practice the minority lead the majority. (Cynthia Lam 1986).

We come back to the story we cited at the beginning of this paper. It is clear why Linda acted and decided as she did. First of all she went with the man who seduced her because she felt "she was no longer a virgin" and will have no more future with anyone else. She had no choice but to give in to her "husband" everytime he wanted her, and since contraception is not allowed her, at the age of 25 she found herself with 5 children whom she could not afford to raise. She put up with the battering of her husband because she was made to believe that whatever happens she must not break up with him. She also was conditioned to be subservient and longsuffering. She felt it would be better to have a husband even if he battered her than to have no husband at all. Even if Linda was not a religious woman, the factors that influenced her decisions and actions stemmed from the religious values that have become a part of the Filipino culture.

### **EFFORTS AT RENEWAL: THE FEMINIST THEOLOGY OF LIBERATION**

It is not enough to analyze the situation of women in the Churches or to pinpoint the roots of women's oppression in religion. It is imperative that out of this analysis, efforts must be exerted to remedy the situation through participation in women's movements. Women trained in theology must also rethink the discipline itself and bring about a transformation within the Churches. Hence, the feminist theology of liberation. Ruether delineates the critical principles of such a theology:

The critical principle of feminist theology is the promotion of the full humanity of women: whatever denies, diminishes, distorts the full humanity of women, and is, therefore, appraised as not redemptive. Theologically speaking, whatever diminishes or denies the full humanity of woman must be presumed not to reflect the divine or an authentic relation to the

divine nor to reflect the authentic nature of things, nor to be the message of work of an authentic redeemer or the community of redemption. This negative principle also implies the positive principle: What does promote the full humanity of women is of the Holy, it does reflect true relation to the divine, it is the true nature of the thing, the authentic message of redemption, and the mission of redemption community. (Ruether 1983).

The agenda of renewal must include all aspects of theology: from the reinterpretation of scriptures, to the historical-critical reflection of Church doctrine from the women's point of view, to the rediscovery of the great women of Church history, to the fundamental questioning of the Church hierarchical structure, its constricting prescriptions, its discriminatory practices, and the sexist language of its liturgy. This will lead to the stripping away of women's false consciousness, freeing them to discover themselves and their potential.

This theology from the perspective of women has also developed a spirituality that women have to develop in order to arrive at their full humanity. The characteristics of this emerging women's spirituality are:

1. *It is self-affirming* — In contrast to the self-denying characteristics of traditional spirituality, the emerging spirituality enables women to affirm themselves, to value their strengths, to nourish their self-esteem, to strive for self-fulfillment as the only genuine basis of helping others. They excise from themselves useless guilt-feelings and allow themselves to bloom.
2. *It is empowering* — Women have realized that there is within them a wellspring of limitless possibilities of growth and development—an inner source of power and strength that goes beyond their wildest dreams. Realization of their situation and renewed self-esteem have made them tap

this inner source making them rise up from their victim status not only to the status of survivors but to that of agents of change capable of empowering others to bring about societal changes towards a more humane world.

3. *It is integral* — Women living this spirituality transcend the dichotomies and dualisms of the more traditional form of patriarchal spirituality. Matter and spirit, sacred and profane, contemplation and action are necessary elements of life. Women flow with their positive and negative experiences living life to the full and with vibrant intensity.
4. *It is liberating* — Having gained self-knowledge and acceptance, women experience an inner liberation especially from fear, guilt, idols and from bitterness and resentment. Not that they don't "feel afraid," but they have learned to distinguish between substantiated and unsubstantiated fear and to act in spite of justified fear. They have transcended neurotic guilt and self-flagellation everytime anything untoward happens to them or to their family. They have been freed from the shackles of peoples' opinions—of people they have been enslaved to in the past from too much loving, and of critical people, who have paralyzed them into inaction. Having gone through and not denying feelings of bitterness and resentment, they have opted to eliminate these poisonous emotions from their hearts to set themselves free for creative actions.
5. *It is contemplative* — Women see the importance of moments of silence, reflection and contemplation to give themselves a better perspective, a certain distance to evaluate what is happening, to keep in touch with their inner source of life, and to retain their sense of humor amidst difficulties—thus acquiring an attitude of "committed carefreeness."

6. *It is healing* — Women trying to live this way are healed from their psychic wounds. Having gotten in touch with themselves and having gained self-esteem, women transcend their traumas, regaining their spiritual health and vigor. And because of the integrality of matter and spirit, they find that even their physical ailments are alleviated. And like wounded healers, they are able to likewise heal others with compassion and empathy.
7. *It is easterly* — It is a spirituality that is exuberant rather than austere, active rather than passive, joyful rather than mournful. It feasts more than it fasts. It is not cold asceticism but a glorious celebration of life. It does not remain with the sadness of Good Friday, but goes on to the triumph of Easter Sunday.
8. *It is a continuous process* — It is not achieved once and for all. It is not even a smooth progressive growth. It has its peaks and abysses. It has its agonies and ecstasies. It can retrogress, but it can also have quantum leaps. It is open to great possibilities of life and freedom and therefore to more and more opportunities to be truly, intensely, and wholly alive.

This emerging women spirituality can be summarized in a phrase: IT IS A PASSIONATE AND COMPASSIONATE SPIRITUALITY.

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