

## RELIGION AND GENDER: A ROMAN

### CATHOLIC CRITIQUE

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I would like to acknowledge our rootedness, as Roman Catholics, in the Jewish Tradition and go on to speak from the perspective of a feminist theological critique within that Tradition in order to identify specific areas of particular power in women's lives and particular impact on the role of women within Roman Catholicism. When I have enumerated and identified some of those areas I would like then to focus on the result of this information, knowledge, and research on the actual lives of women who still function, either within the structure of Roman Catholicism, or have, to some degree, moved out or are functioning somewhere on the fringes.

In addition to the patriarchal hierarchical heritage that Catholic Christianity received from Judaism, an important and very powerful inheritance of Christianity lies in the philosophical dualism that prevailed in the early centuries of the Church and continues to impact on Christian, and particularly Catholic, theological reasoning to this day. The fact that spirit and matter were seen as separate realities or separate arenas of the human experience did not in itself do the damage. What essentially occurred early was a gender identification with the two categories. Predictably, the category of spirit was identified with the male gender, given the rational function, and the category of matter was identified with the female.

It was the damage that came with that assignment of gender to the two categories of philosophical reality, used so predominantly in early Christian philosophizing, that is the first important area of feminist theological criticism today. It is currently evident that this philosophical connection has continued to devalue and dehumanize women and has had an unquestionable impact on the canon law of Roman Catholicism. That law has rendered women in our tradition, for the most part, invisible. At the very least it has disenfranchised them.

In this regard, there can be a kind of empowerment that comes from such a disenfranchisement of women by canon law. Being freed from the laws can give women a kind of entree into a primarily spiritual, not legal, understanding of the Roman Catholic tradition and heritage; a freedom to function in ways that are free of legal restraint. In regard to our predominating philosophical dualism, swallowed

whole and absorbed into our theologizing, one of the most important recognitions a current feminist theological critique points out, is that there was not only the connection of the woman with the carnal and the male with the rational/spiritual, but as well there was a hierarchical assignment of value. And it was in that assignment of value that I believe the worst of the sexism in my tradition has its roots. When I teach my "Women in Religion" class, I like to startle students and jog their thinking by asking this question: "What do St. Augustine and Hugh Hefner have in common?" I hope that what they may come to understand is that, as a consequence of philosophical dualism, women have been not only disenfranchised, but objectified and dehumanized as well. And this is especially true as it surfaces in the writings of the early Christian Fathers.

The second area of feminist theological research and investigation that is extremely important is the area of pseudepigraphal myth. This is the investigation into a body of non-canonical writings that existed from roughly 200 years before to 200 years after the year "zero" and had, we now believe, an important impact on both the writers of Christian Scripture--for example, St. Paul when he instructs women to cover their heads in Corinthians--and on the early Christian Fathers. This connection has been amply demonstrated by feminist theologians like Bernard Prusak<sup>1</sup> (yes, we do have feminist theologians of male gender) who has shown that this pseudepigraphal myth impacted the early Christian Fathers to an extent which enabled them to turn the corner from simple sexism to a very explicit kind of misogyny in their writings. Women are thus seen as the gateway to hell, being somehow dangerous to men in their spiritual journey and pursuit of the sacred and holy. There appears to be a direct connection between the image of women in the stories contained in this non-canonical literature and the writings of the early Christian Fathers in which women are portrayed not just as objectified, subordinate, and inferior, but more importantly and powerfully, as explicitly *dangerous*. It is that *fear of women* that comes through in their writings that demonstrates a clear connection with pseudepigraphal myth. It is that *fear* that functions so powerfully to disable women in the Roman Catholic tradition. That fear, I believe, has been, and unfortunately continues to be, ingrained in the education of all Roman Catholics--both male and female. It functions to create the atmosphere in which our male clerics relate to women. More malignantly, perhaps, it creates the unconscious assumptions upon which Roman Catholic women view themselves and base their personal self-esteem.

A third category of current feminist theological investigation and research is, of course, the female images of the divine with which women in the Roman Catholic tradition have grown up. Particularly powerful is the veneration of the

Blessed Virgin Mary. Most women would find something very positive about the incorporation of a female "co-redemptor" within the tradition. But a feminist critique has pointed out that the consequences of such an incorporation have been a mixed blessing. Feminist scholars have directed our attention to two negative aspects of the presence of the image of the Blessed Virgin Mary. One is that this image has presented a fairly impossible goal for Roman Catholic women to attain. Most of us cannot, and have not, simultaneously been Virgin and Mother. So from that perspective, Mary is an impossible role model. The other negative aspect is much less explicit in the way it has entered our tradition and consciousness. This is the fact that the form that our veneration of Mary has taken often supports and underscores a kind of tradition of courtly love. Some of the scholarship that is being done, particularly in the area of the Medieval period and the veneration of Mary during that period, shows that women appear to have been effectively removed from the real work of a given historical period as a consequence of being pedestaled and therefore disenfranchised and dehumanized. One of the most shocking moments for one of my professors in graduate school was, I think, when I replied to his real concern about why it was that women wished to be "equal" when in fact it was clear that they were spiritually "better." That was very disturbing to him. He had grown up with the assumption that women were somehow spiritually superior to men and he could not understand why women would object to that. The objection of women to this kind of pedestalization is only understandable when you realize how effectively one can be removed from any real participation in the business and struggle of life by this pedestalization; as effectively, in fact, as one can be removed from such participation by being trivialized or subordinated. That is the issue. Women are human beings. They are in full possession of their humanity and therefore they have the same capacity to sin, the same capacity to grow and to become spiritually whole as men. As soon as there is a tendency to remove women from the immediate realm of historical reality, either by pedestalizing or trivializing them, then that potential for full human equality is destroyed.

Equally important is the current attempt to rethink the traditional personification of the Holy Spirit in male terms. Leonard Swidler,<sup>2</sup> among others, has pointed out that to personify the Holy Spirit as female might be quite appropriate, given Her connection with Wisdom in the Hebrew Bible and Her work in the Church and the world--work that involves a good deal of communication and transformation brought about by interpersonal connectedness. As appropriate as such a personification might be, the resistance, at the human level, to such an outrageous image in Catholicism is formidable. To illustrate the reality in concrete terms, I

would like to describe the experience of the only male student I had in my most recent "Women in Religion" class. He was courageous enough to embark on a research project in which he interviewed people coming out of predominantly Roman Catholic Churches on Sunday morning. It is amazing the courage that ignorance can give us! What he did was to ask the people emerging from church whether or not they could imagine the Holy Spirit as female. He videotaped them as they reacted to his question and shared that videotape with the rest of the class. It was a very interesting study that clearly demonstrated an almost complete rejection of any female component in the godhead. He concluded, quite legitimately, I think, from his study that there is probably no better example of idolatry in the Catholic tradition than the one that is challenged by the possibility of imaging the godhead as anything other than male. And, I would suggest, this experiment most dramatically illustrates not just the exclusion of women in official circles of the Catholic tradition, but more importantly, the self-image of women who have chosen to remain within its structure. It also, I believe, explains the great numbers of women who have moved out of that structure in order to find their divine selves. For those of us who function somewhere on the fringes, I believe that there is only one role we can legitimately play; only one role that we are called to play. That role is the role of prophet (in the Hebrew tradition) as moral-ethical teacher.

Catholic women must call their Church into authenticity. They must be courageous in defining the sin of sexism that continues to eat away at the structure of their Church from within and will surely cause it to collapse if that sin is not acknowledged and repentance is not initiated in the immediate future. In their prophetic role there is only one assurance. It is not that their call will meet with success, nor even that their voices will be heard. It is only this: that the Holy Spirit spoke clearly and forcefully to challenge the Roman Catholic Church to transform itself at the Second Vatican Council for the last half of this century, and that, in spite of the fear and the inevitable pain that this challenge has precipitated, the transformation will occur. The Holy Spirit has spoken, and in the end, Her purposes will be realized. She will not be mocked.

#### NOTES

1. "God the Father: Masculine; God the Son: Masculine; God the Holy Spirit: Feminine," *National Catholic Reporter* (January 31, 1975).
2. Leonard Swidler, "Woman: Seductive Sirene and Source of Sin? Pseudepigraphal Myth and Christian Origins," in Rosemary Redford Ruether, ed., *Religion and Sexism: Images of Woman in Jewish and Christian Traditions* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1974), pp. 89-116.

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