

THE BIBLICAL MESSAGE ON EQUALITY

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Roots of Oppression

The Social subjugation of women in most societies is a fact. On this basis there has been a trend to argue in favour of an intrinsic subordination in nature itself. Thus Aristotle thought of the free Greek male as the only fully human person. Slaves, non-Greeks and females were regarded as not fully rational. They were to be servile by nature. The free Greek male represented the superior rational principle over the material, carnal unfree principle of the slave, non-Greek and the female.

St. Thomas Aquinas accepted this Aristotelian version and gave it a further theological implication. That since serfs and women did not have the "eminence" of the free male, they could not be ordained. On the same basis in many countries subject races or "lower" castes were not accepted to the Christian priesthood. So with the Blacks in the U.S.A. and the native people of Sri Lanka in Portuguese times, unless a prince. Here a sociological domination is given a quasi-divine justification by the elaboration of a theological argument to fit into the existing pattern of relationships.

A recent Vatican Declaration on the ordination of women used a similar argument adducing the maleness of Jesus against the ordination of women. This is connected with a view in certain cultures that regards the female as unholy due to menstruation. Woman is also considered inferior and ancillary to man.

Male stereotypes have tended to present women as carnal, sentimental vis a vis male intellectuality, spirituality and virtue. In more recent times woman is regarded as the one who stays at home and guards morality while man is free and not bound by the same morality. "Morality is sentimentalized, privatized and feminized." (Rosemary Reuther). The male is seen as worker, producer, creator of value; while the woman is regarded as a consumer. Woman is regarded as an economic burden. Her services are not monetized. Women are given less rewarding work; they are excluded from leadership roles, but used for servile work and routine jobs.

Even the original inspirations of the world's great religions contain, as it were in germ, the basic teachings on the dignity of women. The founders and sages of these religions have shown a profounder understanding of woman than was prevalent in the society of their day. Their teachings have promoted the equality of the sexes and the sanctity of family life. However they were also limited by the conditions and mentalities of their time. Their followers have tended to minimize the liberative teachings of the religions and tend to emphasize the negative influences. Thus the Religions have also contributed to legitimize this discrimination to some extent. Here we will speak only of the influence of Christianity.

Christianity

In Christianity too there is sexism though both man and woman are baptized and through baptism all are said to become children of God. Only male Christians can be priests and therefore only they can consecrate the Eucharist, absolve in the name of the Lord. In short the male Christian holds a dominant role in the Church, being first in the liturgy, controlling all knowledge and information and are the law makers. Till lately women have generally not been accepted as - theologians. Women religious are considered 'lower' than priests though both have consecrated their lives to Christ.

Theology is culture bound; it grows out of and reflects society. Since woman has traditionally held a subordinate position, sexism has been perpetuated in the Churches too.

Third world countries

This male dominated theology and structures have been exported to the 3rd World countries along with the Christian religion, Asian Christianity has been modelled on the Western European form of theology. It is true that the early missionaries did a great deal of good work in the countries they came to. However history and a critical analysis will show that in spite of this good work, the Churches in the main were with the colonial powers, sided with the exploiters, maintained the status quo and to a large extent were instrumental in alienating the people from their culture and country.

It is true that the Churches were concerned with oppressed groups such as the aged, the illiterates, the untouchables, the orphans, low caste etc. Their services were to these particular groups. They did not, however, show sufficient concern for the oppression of whole peoples. The groups mentioned above are symptoms of a society and the Christians were concerned with the symptoms and not with the root 'causes.

For example they had homes for the "fallen" women and homes for illegitimate children, but no attempt was made to find out why they have become prostitutes. These may be victims of a poverty stricken society, victims of an intensified tourist policy or necessary "playthings" for soldiers away from home as during the Vietnam war (after the Vietnam war about 50,000 prostitutes had to be rehabilitated.)

We will not here go into detail on the workings of the capitalistic system and its methods of exploitation for excessive profit. Persons are used as means for profit maximization. The very Culture of a capitalistic system is discriminative. Economic relations determine human rights, Women are cheap docile labour. Culture of the capitalistic system is discriminative. Coupled with a feudalistic background Capitalism has done much to perpetuate oppression in Asian countries. In Asian countries traditions have maintained male domination, the dowry system, the

exploitation of the rural peasant woman, and the marginalizing of the spinster, the female divorcee, and the widow. But the Churches though they were involved with the educational system in a big way did not help to undermine directly those feudalistic obnoxious attitudes towards women. The education helped to maintain and promote such ideas that a female should be shy and retiring, and well mannered. Her main object in life should be to marry and after that stick to her husband regardless of what he is or what he does. And as for the position of the woman in the Church it is worse, she has hardly any voice at all.

Treating of the symptoms is no doubt necessary and must be done as it is an immediate problem, but should go concurrently with the struggle to change the system that produces such victims. Also to engage in alleviating the pain of individuals alone is frustrating for they keep coming and coming in larger numbers because the system that produces them continues and flourishes. People are oppressed en masse, not separately - it is the same kind of system that produces the prostitutes, the poor, the inequalities of class and caste, the marginalized minorities, oppressed women, frustrated youth and the exploited workers. Thus they must be freed en masse. Liberators must be concerned with a total change in a society's institutions. At the same time they must become new persons for it is from new persons that the new institutions will come which in turn will create the new society. It is towards that concept of the new Christian and the new society in the context of the Asian situation that this paper reflects on.

Non-involvement of the church

An excuse the Churches give against being involved in changing structures is; that the Church should not be involved in politics and should be concerned only in spiritual and moral issues. One fails to see how exploitation by the MNCs., the colonial powers, how colonialism, exploitation unfavourable trade agreements, arms build up, discrimination for reasons of skin, class caste or sex are not moral issues and the behaviour and attitudes of persons towards others are not spiritual questions.

One can be neutral to political parties but not so to political issues where justice and peace are involved. You get Chaplains appointed to the armed forces- they bless the soldiers and are with them while they are fighting - but seldom are chaplains appointed to be with, groups who are for non-violent civil resistance against exploitation, particularly economic exploitation. The reason why the Churches maintain this position is because they have most often been in favour of the status quo. They do not want to be in the disfavour of the ruling party as long as their particular issues affecting religious worship, property and organizations are not touched. In Sri Lanka when the schools were taken over, there was much opposition by the Church, but not much concern has been shown when the MNCs economically exploit the workers and the country. Christian activities and goodwill have often conserved the exploiting colonial and capitalistic system.

With the growth of liberal education and with the technological revolution peoples awareness has grown. No longer is it considered necessary for any person

or group to accept a position of oppression based on superficial lines of race, caste, colour of skin, class or sex. So a revolutionary explosion is taking place. Everywhere oppressed groups have reached that stage of psycho-social evolution, where the alleviation of the exploitation of man by man has become a necessity. Humanity is growing to adulthood. People everywhere seek fulfilment as persons and for meaningful human relationships. This must also take place in the Churches. Theology to be relevant must be involved in and reflect the changing society.

This is not difficult, and it does not mean, that theology would not be Christ centered, for Jesus in the gospels has been an opposer of injustice and inequality.

THE BIBLICAL MESSAGE

The overall teaching of the scriptures

We have only to return to the gospels to see that the Church has not kept to the word of God, has not been a witness of Christ, for the message of equality runs through the scriptures.

It is our thesis (or hypothesis) that in the general teaching of the scriptures there is a basic equality of women and men in the most important aspects of Christian revelation. The differences are less important than the equalities. Theology is not biology. In fact discrimination against women is not from divine revelation but from the culture of the peoples and life of the Church within given cultures. It cannot be from God; for then the God of the Christian would be an unjust being, and hence not the true God who is the fount and source of truth, beauty and goodness.

The basic teachings of the Scriptures are Universal. The revelation of the "mysteries" of our faith are for all and concerning all human beings; Thus:-

CREATION:- Both women and men are made to the image of God. (cf. Genesis) Divinity has no sex. The different characteristics of the female and male psychologies can reflect different aspects of the divine goodness; but there is no question of superiority of one over the other. The most important aspect of creation is not the story of Adam losing a rib in his sleep: (though a male dominated society may relish it to indicate that the woman is an after thought) but that a woman was created to fill the void in man's life.

The revelation of the creation of the entire human race by God is for believers one of the corner stones of universal human rights. It implies a radical rejection of racism, sexism and all other forms of elitism and privilege.

In the story of creation as related in Genesis there is the idea of partnership and sharing. Complementarity is affirmed rather than domination. They shall be two in one flesh.

Since man and woman are both made to the image of God we may say that it is equality in relationships that we should expect between them. For God is a Trinity among whom there is perfect equality. There is no subordination of one to the other, though different roles are appropriated to each of three divine persons. The subordination of woman to man, and worse still the exploitation of woman by man would be a denial of this similarity of the human persons to their Creator. All persons created by God, are endowed with the Holy Spirit. Theological discrimination between woman and man is actually of Church origin and culture bound.

God's Providence which is connected to creation and salvation is towards all persons. It is not sexist. It cares even for animals and plants. "See the birds of the air and the lilies of the field." God's love is universal. God is love and all persons are called to mature and fulfil themselves in this love.

THE HOLY SPIRIT:- Is given to all human beings. Jesus said I will not- leave you orphans I will send down the spirit. At Pentecost men and women were together when the Holy Spirit was received by them. He / She speaks to each human person in the inner depths of one's being. The dignity of being human is also in this intimacy of relationship with the divine. This is fortunately not subject to discrimination on a sex basis.

Thus the entire relationship of the human person to God - the Trinity, is one in which women and men are treated without reference to their sex differences. This is the order of God's creative and sacrificial work. In the Kingdom of God whether on earth or in heaven there is a just equality of all persons. This is also a theological foundation for treating all persons as equal in their inner being, in that which constitutes them in their personhood.

JESUS CHRIST:- took human form to identify with the whole of humanity. His relationship is to all human beings past, present and to come. It was not limited to those of his family, race or generation. Likewise the Incarnation was not a sexist union of God and man to the exclusion of females. Are not females also to be saved in Jesus Christ? Is Christ not the fulfilment of all human beings It is important to emphasize this universality of the assumption of the human form by God in Jesus in view of the recent arguments by the Vatican declaration on the ordination of women concerning the males being an image of Christ, while females are not.

If Jesus took merely masculine form and this sexuality of sexuality of Jesus affirms a superiority of the male over the female, how run women celebrate Christmas? Christmas then should be a day of mourning for women, as it would be the day when God let them down - whilst being born of woman!

The Human person

The biblical teaching on the human person is also not sexist. The basic nature of human person is common to both females and males. Both are made of body and spirit, mind and matter. Both males and females are intelligent and free; they have faculties of understanding and love. All persons have an inner conscience which gives them a guideline of concrete action. All are subject to the laws of birth, growth, maturity, decay and death. The biblical idea of after life is common to both males and females. All are children of the same Father.

These are also the roots of the equality of the sexes in the biblical tradition. This equality is deeper and more fundamental than the inequalities of age, height, weight, race, colour, or sex. The difference of sex makes for a difference of functions specially with reference to child bearing; but this should not be taken to areas to which the sexual difference has no bearing. Secular society is learning this lesson in opening more and more avenues to both men and women. Thus it is overcoming the limits of the cultural conditioning by which certain tasks were related to the persons according to sex though this is not a demand of nature. Thus there are today male nurses and female doctors; male baby sitters and women prime ministers.

The teaching of Jesus Christ, is universal in its essentials. It does not give a preeminence to males in the kingdom of God. It is important to stress that Jesus did not preach "The Church"; he preached "the Kingdom of God" and its values. Only twice in the Gospels does Jesus talk of a Church; his basic teaching is around the Kingdom of God and its values.

The Kingdom is open to all Jews and Gentiles, men and women. He says that harlots and prostitutes will have a higher place in it than Pharisees and scribes (who were males!)

During Jesus' time women did not count much in society and had to avoid men's company in public. Contemporary Jewish sources are full of animosity towards women. Women were considered inferior to men in every respect. In Hans Kung's latest book "On being a "Christian", he gives many examples from various sources to indicate this inferior status of women during that time. But whatever the position was at that time, Jesus did the contrary and thereby gave women an equal footing. To give a few examples women accompanied Christ and his disciples from Galilee to Jerusalem (Lk. 8: 13, Mk. 15, 40-41; his personal affection for women is shown Lk. 10: 38 - 42 and verse 47 (Martha and Mary story) and women attended on Him as He was dying and saw to his burial - Mk. 15: 40 - 41. After the resurrection, Jesus first appeared to a woman. It was Mary Magdalene and Mary the Mother of Jesus who took this good news to the apostles. Thus we could say that the 1st evangelists were women. It was a woman that made him perform the first miracle.

There has been an appropriation by the Church of the good news of Jesus-, as if he was teaching mainly about the Church. The exclusiveness of Christianity is largely due to a narrow interpretation given to the gospels by the Church. This is also a cause and result, of the sexist discrimination in the Church against females.

Gospel values

We can reflect more specifically of the fundamental values which a3~e taught by Jesus in the gospels. These are the kernel of Christian thought and belief, Jesus says his mission is to serve and not to be served. If the males are more akin to Jesus (as the recent Vatican Declaration on ordination seems to affirm) then they should be more keen to serve rather than to dominate. The Gospel presents a view in which there is primacy of service. The first shall be last; he who wishes to lead must serve. The Christian community should not be like others "in which the rulers lord it over the ruled". Hence it would be very difficult - almost contradictory - from the gospels to argue in favour of the natural or derived superiority of males.

Beyond this we see that the central teaching of Jesus is that God is love and that his followers should try to love one another as he has loved them. He gave his life for all. Love of neighbour, even of enemies is his specific teaching. "Do unto others as you would that they should do unto you", summarizes his message. Males cannot truly love females if the latter are subordinated to them. At least this is not the way males would like to be loved. Therefore their perfection consists in treating women as equal partners and not subordinates, and much less as exploited housekeepers. Love of the neighbour has to begin with genuine love of the persons closest to one's life. True love equalizes. There can be no genuine Christian fulfilment of persons without unselfish love. Not all the devious arguments of Vatican officials and theologians concerning the males as symbolizing Jesus the male, can get behind this requirement of equality required for genuine love.

Other gospel values of freedom, sincerity and authenticity are also true for both women and men. The beatitudes are the guideline for all who wish to live by the gospel. "Blessed are the peace makers", "blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice" ... these are valid for all human beings. The law and the ideal are same for both women and men.

Jesus makes this clear when he replied to the voice from the crowd that proclaimed "blessed is the womb that bore him,... or rather blessed is he who hears the word of God and keeps it". Blessedness is not from a more biological process of human generation, but rather in an inner spiritual regeneration. Again he told the Samaritan woman who had five husbands "the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth". John 4, 21 - 24. Jesus taught the prayer "Our Father" to all His followers irrespective of whether they were sons or daughters of the Father.

His teaching on riches and poverty, and on sharing was also for all persons. "Give us this das our daily bread" is a prayer for all;

the rule of forgiving others is likewise universal. Women were not to be less responsible and answerable than men. If they are responsible it is because they are not mere subordinate associates of men but equal co-workers. This can also be seen in the story of Ananias and Sapphira in the Acts of Apostles . Both were equally punished for their insincerity- in feigning to share their wealth with the community while keeping something for themselves.

It is important for the whole Christian community to return to a primacy of these values before the mere letter of the law, specially as articulated by different Christian Churches. Ecclesiastical organization has a tendency to take priority over the liberating message and values of the gospel. The existing Church laws need to be evaluated critically. How far are they from Jesus Christ, and how far are they a result of a male dominated, culture and history. Sometimes specious arguments are invoked based on some details, to build up a theology of male spiritual power and authority in the Church, while the message of Jesus is neglected in its totality. The line of liberation is to go to the core of religion and not merely to the Church as an institution.

TOWARDS LIBERATION

The rediscovery and the human being

The person has reason, is intelligent, is an individual and must be given full freedom * develop one's personality, become a full person irrespective of sex, colour, race etc. This must be realized not only as an idea but an intention and put into effect in society. Then the relationship between persons - because we are in Society - here the idea of Community is an enriching factor. Therefore coresponsibility, support of one another, forgive one another, a sense of partnership, learn to listen and speak to each other, give and take, respect for each other become fundamental values and for the fulfilment of both, instead of alienation in domination or a dependent relationship. Church is also fundamentally a community where the membership is free. We have the option to be a member of the Church or not and this presupposes that this is possible only for persons with freedom, with a sense of responsibility - therefore woman is an equal person and responsible for salvation just as a man is.

But the Church today is hierarchical and is not a Community. If any Church emphasizes the hierarchical structure to the extent of denying the value and role of a person, to that extent such a Church is not a Community. This is part of the crisis in the Church today, not only between man and woman but also among the males - lay persons and clerics, priest and bishops. Patriarchy has taken hold of the Church. If the Church is to be the symbol as it claims of the redeemed and of redemption, it must get rid of this injustice of discrimination and of the dehumanizing of persons. The Church must positively respond to the role of women, and thereby be a symbol and a home ground of liberated living. Only then is the Church a credible sacrament of redeemed and redeeming humanity.

The concept of God must be freed from one of merely being a father. God is rather the source and ground of all being. God must be liberated from being made

to the image of man (person). Emphasis should be on the Kingdom of God and its values and not on the Church. The idea of the Church is narrow whereas that of the Kingdom is universal and fulfilling for all.

Women need to Theologize

Women must evolve an alternative Theology. They themselves must do the theologizing. A body of thinking can be effective and relevant only if it emerges from the people itself. In this case an effective non-male dominated theology can emerge from a reflection by women themselves. The reflection must not begin with the male. Western clerical monastic way of theologizing which is to draw conclusions only from scriptures and tradition of the Church - to do so would be to be entrapped without any hope of getting out of it - for the history of theology as it is today is a vast forest of male domination and to seek female liberation from that is like finding a needle in a haystack.

Theology must be liberated from its implicit and explicit emphasis on the maleness of religions. Thus one must begin with a firm affirmation that there are other sources of theology. This is an act of faith. For women themselves must believe that God speaks through them. This means giving a theological value to women's group meetings, to their discussions and reflections, and women should also believe that the Holy Spirit is present with them in their discussions and deliberations. The movement of the liberation of women in the Church is a particular indication of the activity, the fertility of the Spirit today amongst us.

It is very important that this stance is accepted, because often women tend to think that they cannot theologize and such matters should be left to bishops and male clerics. Even women religious are not considered capable of theology. Women think they do not have the know-how, they are self-deprecating. The tragedy is that they have been conditioned to think so - this is a condition of any oppressed group, no doubt.

We should bear in mind that it is not necessary that it should be scholarly; for the Holy Spirit speaks to all through the experiences of the living. Even small groups that reflect and share their experiences can contribute towards such a theology. We must examine critically what is presently put forward as faith, or dogma, and not possibly accept what is given saying that it is for all times.

This is a challenge for it means a new responsibility for women. The need is to build up a contextual theology without imagining that male theology is universal theology and is for all times. We must build women power and there must be contestation in the Church, not for mere opposition sake but for the building up of true equal relationships for we are all made in the image of God.

We must be involved in the teaching of the faith-particularly imparted to the young - our children. Catechesis should not only be for the preservation of the

faith, but it should be for the understanding of people in their environment which includes therefore an understanding of the liberal and radical forces in Society. Catechesis should be related to the different types of social forces and options. Because this is not so that youth often leave the Church. A thorough re-examination is required of the Church's teachings in the light of Christ's gospel and our living experience. This is imperative. It is important that social dynamics be included in catechesis for Jesus' death was due to his effort to build a new system of values and relationships among the people in relation to the social, economic, cultural and political structure of his day. This must not be left to the males - to quote Philip Potter of the WCC. "It is the women themselves who in front of God must take their destiny in their own hands; for no one will do it for them the liberation of the woman also signifies the liberation of the man and a stage towards the unity of women and men in Christ.

The Magnificat

The "Song of Mary in the Gospel". "The Magnificat" Luke 51 - 53 indicates Christians (this includes women) should be concerned with liberation. (Fr. Tissa Balasuriya's "Mary a mature and committed Woman" in Logos Vol. 13 No. 2 August 1974). In the Magnificat Mary-announces the promises of God to her people. She proclaims the liberative message of salvation promised by God to his people. We see her involvement in society, her condemnation of what is not good. The proud and haughty are got rid of in favour of the poor and simple; power is to pass from the mighty to the people; hungry and the starving got the good things and the rich are sent empty away. This is not just a pious prayer. Today one hears such words only from revolutionaries. Unfortunately the Christian tradition has succeeded in diluting Mary's message. The church has not presented Mary like this but rather presented her only as a mild, meek, tender and domesticated person. Her word should be the inspiration for radical action for change of mentalities of persons and structures of societies. The Magnificat can therefore be one of the inspirations for Christian women in their struggle for a fuller humanity.

Source : 'Logos' - Volume 22 No : 3 October 1983