

Women and the church: a case of discrimination.

The church discriminates against women, that is it acts to make distinctions between women and men, acting in favour or against one or the other, with results that I believe are negative for both women and the church, indeed for the world at large. In a world of problems, of poverty, hunger and the threat of annihilation by nuclear weapons, it is sometimes said that to discuss the issue of women, particularly of women in the church, is to avoid all the major problems of the world and to concentrate instead on an issue of concern only to bored middle-class women. Against this I would say that, in the words of Sr Joan Chittister, the women's issue is not just a woman's issue; it is a human issue; it is the radical justice issue in the world today; It is impossible to say we are interested in problems of poverty without being concerned with the issue of women because 3/4 of the world's poor are women (note, not a half). Women are legislated into poverty by laws made by men which give them lower wages, lower pensions, . Women are made poor. Men own 99% of the world's resources, and the gap between the ownings of men and those of women is increasing. Hilda Scott calculates that ~~in Australia~~, if present trends continue, ~~99%~~ of ^{nearly} _{all} the poor will soon be women.

It impossible to care about hunger without caring about women: 2/3rd of the hungry are women; especially in poorer countries, the best food is given to men and to children, and when a woman is past the breeding age, she will be lucky if she is fed at all.

Do you care about nuclear disarmament? Then recognise that 1/2 of the people killed will be women and they will have been killed by weapons that men are designing to protect them; and no one will have asked them if that is alright.

So I make no apology about talking about women, about highlighting what I see as discrimination against women in the church. To me the church remains one of the last bastions in our society in which it is still considered officially proper to discriminate against women, to treat women as not fully equal to men.

Of all the areas in which this discrimination is found, I want to talk about the issue of women and words. For the people of The Word use language to silence women into submission and subordination. I shall deal with three topics in this area:

1. the use of exclusive language, especially in worship;
2. the selections of passages from scripture, especially those from the old testament in the lectionary;
3. the language of God.

and I want to suggest what the inequalities in these areas do to women and , i believe, also to men.

1. the use of exclusive language rather than inclusive language: Sr Helen Kearins has called the language we use a "language framed to keep us (women) on the fringe, without a word." As long as women are linguistically invisible ,they are actually invisible, they are non-people. Only in the church is it still proper to

paid / unpaid work

refer to me as man/he/son/brother/. No-one in my family or at work refers to me that way. But the church clings to he/man language with such a tenacity that I can only conclude that it is very important to those men who make the rules to keep women in silence. Why is this important? I believe that it is important because our thoughts are framed in words and often impossible without words; our language helps to form the world of thoughts, feelings and imagery in which we live." It is our means of ordering, classifying, and manipulating the world. It is through language that we become members of a human community, that the world becomes comprehensible and meaningful, that we bring into existence the world in which we live." (Dale Spender). The actual words we use are central to our being. So what is significant about the use of the so-called generic 'man' for human and about the use of male pronouns for all people? What happens when they are used? What do you imagine when you hear the word 'man'? How many here have an immediate image of a female? Anyone? Most studies show that both males and females image the male. Moreover, whenever these he/man words are used, males know that they refer to them. For females it is quite different. The words may refer to them or they may not. It is necessary to pause and analyse the sentence and ask 'is this me or is this not me'. The language refers clearly and unambiguously to men at all times, but is always ambiguous for women. The constant use of these words to refer to humans means that males are in the kept in the foreground and females are in vague background. Linguistically, women are absent. .so why do we do it? It is usually said that it is done because it is grammatically correct. First let us note that man was declared a generic by male grammarians, not by popular acclaim. Second, it was an 1850 act of british parliament that insisted on he to represent she, and this on the ground that the greater includes the lesser: in other words, these rules are rules to ensure the supremacy of the male. Is that the way you want it?

Let us try the reverse, the use of the female pronouns to stand for all of us. I shall read a few familiar lines from John's gospel; stay with your feelings, especially the men; you may feel uncomfortable.

I am the bread of life,
 She who comes to me will never be hungry;
 She who believes in me will never thirst.

She who eats my flesh and drinks my blood
 lives in me
 and I live in her.

If anyone loves me she will keep my word
 And my Father will love her
 And we shall come to her
 and make our home with her.

Any reactions?? (Break here for people to talk one-to-one)

When i hear the female pronouns i know in head and gut that they refer to me; they have an immediacy and a reality that the male pronouns do not have. When i changed he to she for the first time, i knew that god was with me and the Jesus was speaking to

Each
 From

① women
 so rarely
 hear it
 out loud
 this way

② men
 don't hear
 it at all.

me in a way that i had never known it before. I know that I am not alone in this; that many other women find the same thing.

2. The lectionary: the words we hear each sunday. Each sunday and major feast day, we hear three readings from OT and NT, selected from scriptures to teach us the central tenents of our faith. I assume that the sections chosen for sundays and major feasts are those sections that seem to the compilers to contain the most important parts of the scriptures, the parts we really need to hear, to meditate on and to use in prayer. So how do women fare? Since the scriptures are the products of patriarchal cultures, we expect to find that men are the leading figures; that's the result of history. But the selections chosen are not a random selection giving equal weights to all parts. The dietary laws, for example, are omitted as irrelevant to our time. The selection is a process of theology. So spend some time, some day, looking at how the stories of women are treated, at how many of them are used.

As an example of what we are missing i shall use the story of Moses. Moses as an adult is heard in many selections talking with god and the people. But the story of Moses starts with the actions of a number of remarkable women. Remember that moses should have been killed at birth by the midwives, by order of the pharoah; but the midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, acted to save his life, not to kill him; by a brave act of civil disobedience they , with tender loving defiance of the rulers of the state allowed moses to live. but of their actions the sunday lectionary tell us nothing. Next it was necessary that the little boy be fed and looked after: so what happens,? Again women are found who defy the rules of the state, defy the laws of the land which preach death. The very daughter of the pharoah acts together with a women of another culture, a slave woman, Moses sister. Together they bridge the gulfs of race and class and defy the laws of the pharoah to ensure the life of moses. But of their actions we are told nothing.

The treatment of women in the lectionary proclaims to me the message that women are irrelevant to salvation history - except as vehicles to produce sons.

And so to my last point.

3. The language of God.

Christian theology has always stated that god is neither male nor female but is pure spirit. But while this is sound theology, in practice the words used for god are usually male. Our Scriptures do not represent god the creator in exclusively male terms; god is presented from the moment of creation as one whose true image in humanity is male-and-female. Nevertheless neither the female dimension of god nor female images are used in our liturgy nor discussed in our theology. Try She for god, and hear the strange sound.

But when the spirit of truth comes
she will lead you to the complete truth
since she will not be speaking as from herself. etc.

Or from the psalms:

The Holy One is tender and compassion,
slow to anger, most loving;
her indignation does not last for ever,
her resentment exists a short time only;

So tenderly as a mother treats her children,
So the Holy One treats those who fear her,
She knows what we are made of
She remembers we are dust.

What effect does this use of the female have on you?
What effects does its absence from our lives have on women?
What does a male-only image of God do to women and to men?

(Break here for One-to-one talk)

(1) it gives women a deep sense of exclusion from the divine; women imbibe this as part of their sense of who they are. God to women is man writ large, and men become god writ small. God and man belong to the same order of things and from that order women are excluded. Men accept this view of god. Hence both women and men have agreed that only men can represent god as family head or ordained minister. Women have a deep sense of their inappropriateness in terms of the divine, of being alienated from the divine.

(2) women experience god as they experience men, as those on whom they depend, defer to; so that it is difficult for women to have an easy, relaxed friendship with God in the way in which they relate to other women.

(3) women believe that they have to go to god through men.

This all-male image of God, this use of all-male language to speak of God, alienates women from themselves, from each other and from God. Moreover, the language used stresses particular male roles, rather than 'whole men'; it speaks of father, lord, master, judge; these are roles of domination and they put us into the place of subordinates, a place where society has often put women. I believe that both women and men will only be whole when both the male and the female images of god are used equally freely, when women see themselves as as close to god as they see men to be, and when men see this too.

The women's issue highlights all the major issues ^{w/it} in which we are confronted ~~with~~ in consideration of domination and subordination, of a society in which some people have power over others. It unmasks what Joan Chittister refers to as the theology of domination, the theory that God made some people superior to others, to be in charge of others, and that they know who they are. It is a theology that leads not only to sexism but also to racism, class divisions, all in the name of God.

So where can we go from here? What should we do? One place to go to gain a deeper image of god is back to our dreaming time, ^{stories} back to our scriptures to see if they can help us to gain a truer image of both god and of ourselves and if this truer image will help us to free our world from the structures of domination and subordination, from some people with power over others, from tragedies of hunger, poverty and nuclear wars. I recently came

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across some words of an american woman which expressed this in a way i find very graphic and very moving and i should like to finish with her words:

Search the Scriptures,
for in them you will find
this God of the loveless,
this God of Mercy, Love and Justice,
who weeps over these her children,
these her precious ones who have been carried from the womb,
who gathers up her young upon her wings
and rides along the high places of the earth,
who sees their suffering
and cries out like a woman in travail,
who gasps and pants;
for with this God,
any injustice that befalls one of these precious ones
is never the substance
of rational reflection and critical analysis,
but is the source
of a catastrophic convulsion within the very life of God.

(Karen Drescher)