

WOMEN AND RELIGION

Debates on a search

Reviewed by: Zoë Hersov

A

A symposium on *Women and Religion* was held in Thailand in March 1996, under the auspices of the Heinrich Böll Foundation in Asia. The published proceedings consist of ten papers, each followed by a lively discussion. One's immediate reaction is to join Beth Gelding in hailing "this wonderful assembly of women, from so many religious traditions and so many societies".

An impressive range of views and experiences is represented, with significant contributions from the Buddhist, Hindu, Christian and Islamic traditions. In addition to the expected differences, some surprising convergences emerge in unlikely places.

Durre Ahmed and Madhu Khanna point to the parallels – even 'synthesis' – between Hinduism and Islam in the subcontinent. Gudrun Ludwar-Ene's account of female spirit mediums in Africa evokes an interesting response from Chatsumarn Kabilsingh, who compares the phenomenon to the medium cult in Thailand. Hema Goonatilake then exclaims: "While listening to Gudrun, I was thinking, 'Oh my God, am I in Sri Lanka?'" Sri Lanka is one of the world centers of Buddhism and side by side, we have this spirit kind of thing which we call *Tovil*."

This sort of interchange conveys the atmosphere of the meeting in a way that set pieces alone cannot do. Probably the best way to review such diverse material is to select and examine certain salient themes that run through both the papers and the discussion.

First of all, there is the familiar feminist denunciation of the wrongs wrought by patriarchies of the past that have led to the subjugation of women. It is charged that not only 'male science', but psychology and religion too, have been viewed "through a masculine lens", producing a jaundiced picture of women and their role.

The concepts 'male' and 'western' frequently go together, as in the "distorted western Judeo-Christian hyper-masculine consciousness".

Certainly in Christian writings woman is often depicted as the cause of the Fall, the wicked temptress and destroyer of mankind. In the battle between the flesh and the spirit, the female sex is firmly placed on the side of the flesh. As Angelika Kϳster-Lossack observes, the purity of Mary is contrasted with the impurity of Eve.

However, not all the blame for women's plight can be laid at the door of the Judeo-Christian heritage. Madhu Khnna maintains that the Hindu patriarchy was supported by the theology of the subordination of the Feminine. Misogynist passages in Buddhist texts rival those found in their patristic counterparts. Even in Sufism, according to Annemarie Schimmel, there is an ambivalent attitude to women, who are equated with the *nafs*, or lower soul, that seeks to ensnare the pure spirit. In general, one has to conclude that androcentrism and misogyny, far from being unique to Western thought, play an equal part in other cultures. Some apparently anti-women phenomena are universal. A striking example is the menstrual taboo. The Judaic apprehension of pollution is codified in the ritual laws of Leviticus (15.19,24,28), a concern that later appears in the Qur'an (2:222). The notion of women's impurity is also found in Africa and in the orthodox Brahman Tradition.

Many reasons are given for this belief that is often associated with the conviction of women's inferiority. There is an underlying fear of women and their seemingly insatiable sexuality. Chatsumarn Kabilsingh quotes a saying in the Jataka: "Women's lust cannot be filled. It's like a well – no matter how much you put in it you can never fill it up." As Angelika Lϳster-Lossack puts it: "women as sexual partners, as life-giving mothers, as life-preserving nurturers of children have been considered 'impure', because their sexuality and reproductive functions were interpreted as basically threatening to the male-defined spiritual goals of human life." At the same time, Roshan Dhunjibhoy points out that "there is not only fear, but also envy in the relationship between men and women", as men covet women's creative powers.

Only because they have been powerless and oppressed certain benefits may be involved. The 'curse' of menstruation provides a welcome respite from household tasks. Durre Ahmed says she has always believed that women invented the taboo "because it suits us... It is a way of taking a

break, you don't have to cook, clean, worry about anything... and everybody is in fact terrified. I don't see why we keep going back and saying, let's remove it, it is impure, and so on!"

To sum up, this first theme has been the standard feminist critique of ideas and practices that are traced to the prevailing male definition of women. The entire subject is expressed in Western intellectual terms, even in places that involves the rejection of the West. The themes that follow are more original and contain some surprising and illuminating ideas. In the case of all the participants, the response to the legacy of misogyny and subjection is a summons to return to the origins of their faith. Hema Goonatilake explains: "My approach has been particularly in Buddhism, to sometimes use the word 'fundamentalism'. I am being a fundamentalist for my advantage in order to transform society." The call to go back to the Buddha is echoed by the call to return to the teaching and practice of Jesus or the example of the Prophet.

The search for women's original contribution leads to an investigation of the "lost legacy", revealing the hidden women of Buddhism, women Zen masters, Sri Lankan nun-historians, women in the Bible and medieval abbesses, as well as the more shadowy witches of Germany and priestesses in the Philippines. In particular, this search demands the reclamation and reinterpretation of religious texts that, it is charge, were deliberately concealed by male interpolations and omissions. Bishop Jepson asserts that the scriptures were edited by men and used for their own ends. In the same way, Chatsumarn Kabilsingh claims that Buddhist texts were written by men to preserve their interests. Beth Goldring confirms the necessity "of redeeming Buddhism and Buddhist practice from the limitations of male chauvinism and sexism.... [in order to] bring Buddhism far closer to what the Buddha was and intended." It is therefore important to distinguish and separate the 'fundamentals' formulator additions-an exercise familiar to the modern Biblical critic.

Women of all faiths are equally keen to uncover the "core teaching" and the "Original practices". In quest of a culturally pure heritage, they single out the ethical, egalitarian principles that are an integral part of the great religions. The Buddha taught that men and women have equal potential to achieve enlightenment. The Book of Genesis contains the simple statement of the equality of the sexes, made together in God's image, and Christianity

form the earliest times centered on the universal application of the Gospel. In the Qur'an, God speaks repeatedly of "Muslim men and women", "the faithful men and women", and the same religious injunctions are valid for both sexes.

The feminists' endeavour to recover what is authentic from their past to counter what they find objectionable in the present can prove both positive and enlightening. However there are dangers in choosing what aspects of the past to preserve. When merely an expression of subjective preference, the selective process can lead to the rejection of important texts. Such as the uncomfortable sayings of St Paul, while at the same time laying undue weight on peripheral figures and sects. In the Christian context, one could end up opting for the Cathar heresy because it granted equality to women! It is also surely simplistic to attribute all the difficult passages to the male hand. In a fascinating paper, Madhu Khanna tells us that men in fact largely wrote the Tantras, which accord an extraordinarily high place to women!

In women's quest for their own spirituality, undoubtedly the most fruitful sphere is mysticism, which transcends gender and creed, and in which, as Sister Mary John says: "all religions become one". An interesting point that emerged in the Symposium was the importance of an attitude of passive receptivity. Gudrun Ludwar-Ene observes that in the case of the African medium, "the power implied is the power of the spirits granted under the condition of self-negation". Durre Ahmed explains that the meaning of the word Islam is surrender – submission – peace, and concludes that "a ready receptivity is equally valid for all traditions, all religions."

The last and most instructive theme for the Western reader is the distinctive perspective of the Third World women. There is, first of all, the stress on unity and connections, in contrast to the Western penchant for separation and 'opposites'. As Hema Goonatilake remarks in the course of the discussion: "We never could see religion, culture and traditions separately in our society [Sri Lanka]."

There is an insistence on the masculine and feminine elements in religion. Durre Ahmed calls attention to the parallels in Islam to the concepts of Yin and Yang and the significance of the name of God "*Al-Rahman*", the Compassionate, derived from the root of the word for womb in Arabic. All traditions recognize balance as an essential feature. Durre Ahmed points to

“the balance between numerous aspects of human relationships, between male and female, among people, with nature and God”. Chatsumarn Kabilsingh describes Buddhism as the Middle Path – a term typically associated with Islam.

While emphasising the necessity for unity and balance, most of the participants readily recognize the dissimilarities between men and women. Durre Ahmed remarks that “the question ‘Who am I?’ has very different answers for men and women.” The approach to the sacred is not the same. As Beth Goldring puts it: “Men simply do things differently... Of course we understand that all paths are one, but may be the steps at every moment are not necessarily identical.”

The divergence between the sexes is not only apparent in the spiritual quest. The current denial of all differences, coupled with the insistence on treating men and women as through they were identical, has had disastrous effects in the West. The demand for sexual freedom for all has, as Beth Goldring observes, resulted in the exploitation and abuse of women. The integration of men and women in the armed services in the US and UK has produced a spate of claims of sexual harassment and rape, together with a not surprisingly high pregnancy rate among women sent to sea with men.

Religious settings are not immune. Beth Goldring gives a horrifying account of abuses by Buddhist teachers in the US- and experiences that is echoed in Sister Mary John’s allusions to incontinent priests and Protestant ministers. Chatsumarn Kabisingh argues that both men and women are vulnerable in these situations, and Durre Ahmed remarks, on a note of welcome realism, that “whereas men tend to rape, women tend to seduce. It’s just a difference of style.”

To conclude, it has been very rewarding to review these proceedings and to have the opportunity to follow a group of intelligent, articulate women striving to find a feminine ethos within their various traditions. Those from the Third World prove wise and confident enough not to feel that they have to abandon their own cultures in favour of alien customs and beliefs. Although the rhetoric of feminism is freely used, the Western feminist agenda is not swallowed whole.

A great advantage of seeking to formulate a women’s platform base on one’s own heritage is that the results are rooted in time and place and

transcend social class. Undiluted feminism tends to appeal only to a Westernized upper middle class and generally neglects the real concerns of the people. Madhu Khanna notes that development programmes based on Western models tend to disregard popular religion and culture, and Roshan Dhunjibhoy refers movingly to the comfort offered by “the religions of the poor”. This whole subject would be a fruitful area of investigation for a future conference.

The attitude of the participants throughout the Symposium is, as Hema Goonatilake comments, non-Confrontational and inclusive. They eschew the stand of the radical feminists that encourages women to adopt the worst qualities of men (aggression and promiscuity), with dire consequences for marriage, the family and human relationships. There is recognition that the sexes can be different *and* equal. Minimizing or denying all differences diminishes the possibility for men and women to complement each other. It is admitted that men have problems too. Their frustration and rage at poverty and powerlessness is often, in turn, deflected onto women. Far from increasing the gulf between the sexes, it is essential to make common cause and work together for the regeneration of society.

The voice of these new women of the third World rings out with clarity and vigour. This is the first generation of women to be literate, able to analyse history and produce ‘herstory’, and come together to discuss their ideas and their experience. Not only have these women an enormous contribution to make to their own societies, but we in the West have much to learn from them. There is a clear need for more meetings of this kind to continue the ‘debates on a search’. As Durre Ahmed says, we live at a unique point in time. It is our duty and responsibility to use it well.