

A NOTE ON FEMINISM & CHRISTIANITY

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'God-Talk and the Liberation of Women', Susana Carryer's feminist article in *Real World* 2, deserves some comments. Of Ms Carryer's key statements I quote and comment briefly upon a half-dozen. Then, I offer a glimpse of useful literature on 'the liberation of women'.

(1) "Biblical images of God as a mother . . . point to Mother as a viable and biblically correct option as a name for God."

If that is so, should not a scholarly article give references to those biblical images? Readers who do not know their Bible well enough, such as myself, cannot readily find these neglected passages. This comment is no mere pedantry; readers are entitled to wonder whether the Bible does actually contain passages to the effect (when read in context, as we would all like to do) claimed by Ms Carryer.

(2) ". . . the association of God with Father has become normative in our tradition . . . a cycle that is very difficult to break out of".

In one of God's central disclosures to us about his nature and how we should behave toward him, he has instructed us to address him as "Our Father". That key revelation of the Bible is of course reinforced by many others. This instruction presumably implies that, insofar as our feeble human minds can grasp and briefly refer in human terms to our relationship with God, it is most like that of a human child (male or female) with its father. Calling God 'Father' is no fleeting fashion or mere social construction; ironically, calling him anything else *is*.

(3) "the maleness of Christ has been converted from an historical accident . . . to being an ontological necessity".

Why God chose to reveal himself in a male rather than a female human constitutes something of a mystery which we may think about (while not hoping to understand fully). But the fact that he did thus choose remains a sheer fact.

To read into this historical given a universal ontological necessity that Christ (or any adequate manifestation of God) had to be masculine would be to go further than the Church has ever officially sought to. But to go to the other extreme and term it a mere accident entails an arrogant posture toward God of criticism which I, for one, find preposterous. God's choice within his creative process to make Jesus male really is a God-given fact not up for questioning. If the world is as God made it, trammelled by us sinners, we are faced with the sufficiently large task of

discerning truly what are the facts of providence; speculation about whether Jesus could have been female seems, at best, peculiarly vacuous and evasive of reality.

Any thinking of God as personal entails the model of the human species, which happens to be male or female, as the only mode in which we can understand personality. To abandon gender must mean all too soon to lose personality. Doubtless God is unimaginably more than personal; but in our human apprehending he must be at least personal. The pronoun *It* would leave him sub-personal, no more to be found responding to us as I to Thou.

But the colossal recent mistake has been to think of sexuality as the primary and divisive category among us. We are first of all human. It is out of our humanity and His that we acclaim in Christ the human being to gather up and re-present before the Father a whole redeemed humanity.

(4) "Terms promoting a linear rather than hierarchical relationship need to take their rightful place alongside the others . . ."

That Nature is inherently thoroughly and profoundly hierarchical has been detailed in Goldsmith's recent *magnum opus* 'The Way'. As well speak of an animal body without organs, or a cell without organelles, as babble of a non-hierarchical ecosystem or society. It is vacuous, futile, and confusing.

A further criticism, on the level of logic: to present "linear" and hierarchical as tolerantly co-existing characteristics is woolly-minded. Even if we were not stuck by providence with inherently hierarchical biology and society - that is, if we had a real possibility of supplanting hierarchy with "linearity" - it would indeed be a supplanting that Ms Carryer promotes. Any impression that she is advocating kindly addition 'alongside', not replacement, is at best confused.

(5) "Female images of God . . . are *necessary* to affirm the goodness and legitimacy of female sexuality and identity." [my emphasis]

I hope the falsity of this assertion will need little exposition. Goodness and legitimacy abound in many aspects of humanity without any necessity of being projected onto God himself. Female sexuality has been affirmed as not merely good but glorious in a colossal mass of literature, song, and art; female images of God have evidently not been necessary for the production of these affirmations.

(6) ". . . women are [represented as] the descendants of Eve, the cause of all the evil in the world . . ."

For many years, readers of the *Listener* were subjected to endless weekly accusations by feminist Marilyn Waring to the effect that men are to blame for the world's ills. The interpretation of *Genesis* of which Ms Carryer complains has, I submit, had far less (relatively negligible) influence during the past half-century at least.

Having pointed out these rather obvious comments, one can nevertheless expect that they will be ignored by the political ideology of wimmin's lib, which diligently avoids critical discussion. Christians should be clear-eyed

about the nature of this irrational political trend which has already made severe inroads on language, reasoning, politics and religion. (The extent of the latter inroads is glimpsed in the very fact that the article on which I have commented was accepted for publication.) Feminists, while differing amongst many sundering camps, are generally gaining political power (overtly or deviously) on the basis of misrepresentations of providence. I wish therefore to take this opportunity to point out some cogent facts about the way God has actually set up the world. Similar summaries have appeared elsewhere.

Ms Carryer, like most if not all feminists, complains repeatedly about patriarchy as if it were obviously evil and as if social rearrangements can do away with it. The book (Goldberg 1979) which first summarised the findings in the societies that have been studied on the subject of male dominance tells us that in all 1400 societies, men occupy the positions of apparent power. (The Amazons turn out to be a forgery.) Similarly, Keesing's (1976) textbook on cultural anthropology, in its section "womens' worlds", says:-

As 16 women social anthropologists compellingly argue in 'Woman, Culture, and Society' (Rosaldo & Lamphere 1974), there is no evidence that matriarchal societies have ever existed. The apparent universality of male dominance - at least in public and political realms - must be a starting point for an anthropology of women.

The second edition of this book enlarges in very helpful ways, emphasising the need for both empathy and some measure of detached judgement regarding inferences of 'exploitation'.

Confusion often arises among people who have not looked up the meaning of the term patriarchy. Its characteristics relate merely to the formal, public arenas and social hierarchies, in which men brandish weapons, sometimes use them, march around in uniform, deliver loudly the decisions of society, defend and enforce them, etc. The very different forms of power exerted by women, mostly in private, in the formation of those decisions, are by their nature far less amenable to historical research; but it is a serious error to claim that patriarchy entails a lack of power for women. A particular case is that of many Maori women who are content not to speak on the marae because they do in fact speak through their menfolk, more effectively.

The latest and in many ways the best relevant textbook is Dr Anne Moir's 'Brain Sex' (1989). Like her predecessor Goldberg, Moir is rigorously blacked out, as is Illich's key book 'Gender', by feminist "scholar"s, of whom Margarita Levin (1986) makes some stinging criticisms.

Lisa Tuttle's 'Encyclopedia of Feminism' (1987) records the universality of patriarchy but asserts "alternatives to patriarchy may at least be imagined". I however contend that no such fantasy has actually been formulated, and that we cannot regenerate community on the basis of the erroneous notion - the axiom of feminism - that closely similar ways of life should be led by women and men. That such a notion needs to be pointed out as not only unrealistic but also highly undesirable illustrates how many have strayed, especially during this last quarter-century, from well-founded traditional understandings of gender.

Paul's words about the subjection of women (*1 Cor. 7; 1 Tim. 2,8ff.*) have not endeared that apostle to radical feminists. To be reconciled with Paul's whole evident position, those passages need to be understood as contingent

upon and conditioned by the society Paul lived in. We need the same understanding of Jesus' oft-cited decision to enlist no women in the intimate fellowship of the Twelve. In his human life Jesus, with his disciples, was a Jew faithful in daily matters to the social perceptions of his culture and time. Over and over again in his ministry we find Jesus following these, working "with the grain". Only thus could his mission be accomplished among the people into whom (very oddly as the rhymster says) God chose to become incarnate.

If we want to find Paul's convictions on the plane that counts eternally, we must go to the splendid *Gal. iii*28-9: "There is no such thing as Jew and Greek, slave and freeman, male and female, for you are all one person in Christ Jesus". Through the centuries this has been the normative text of conduct for any society to be called decently Christian. The firstcouple - Jew and Gentile - was given recognition in Christian practice during the first century; 'bond and free' took longer, until the 19th century. Let us work to see that 'male and female' become reconciled in the full Galatians sense in our time. Feminism is, on the whole, antagonistic to that Christian challenge.

Much more needs to be written about this important topic. To my mind the real question is, what is the appropriate division of labour between men and women? What, especially, is the meaning for today's men and women of the Bible's first three chapters? Have readers of *Real Worlds* thoughtful suggestions on that?

SOME GOOD SOURCES

Goldberg S (1979) 'Male Dominance: the Inevitability of Patriarchy'. Abacus

Goldsmith E R D (1992) 'The Way'. Century

Greer G (1983) 'Sex & Destiny'. Secker & Warburg

Illich I (1982) 'Gender'. Pantheon

Keesing R M (1976; 1981) 'Cultural Anthropology'. Holt Rinehart

Levin M (1986) 'Caring New World: Feminism and Science' *Amer. Scholar* 57(winter) 100-106

Lyndon N (1992) 'No More Sex War'. Sinclair-Stevenson

Moir A, Jessel D (1989) 'Brain Sex: the real difference between men and women'. Michael Joseph; see also the epilogue to the American edition (Lyle Stuart 1991).

Tuttle L (1987) 'Encyclopedia of Feminism'. London: Arrow

[the then editor Rev Calum Gilmour printed this - with an ill grace. The only response was from some harpie purporting to complain at my failure to cite any reference for my statement that God had instructed us to address him as 'Our Father'. Calum printed that.]