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Nuns, Witches and Patriarchy¹

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In this paper I want to explore the part that religious belief (as traditionally understood), has played in the development of our understanding of being men or women. My main aim is to examine the radical feminist claim that all major religions are *patriarchal*: that they present a view of women as fundamentally secondary to men, and of men as those in whom should be vested all power, privilege and authority. According to this view traditional religions militate against any real freedom for women, and uphold injustice and sometimes even violence, in the name of their gods.

To a large degree this claim can be quickly substantiated. In the ancient religions of Hinduism and Buddhism women have always had a subordinate place. And even though the most frightening aspects of male dominance in Hindu society, the practice of suttee² and female rape or sacrifice has of course gone, patriarchal structures are still built into most aspects of Hinduism. Even in contemporary Buddhism considerable inequality exists between the sexes. The service of a Buddhist monk, for example, brings a much greater 'field of merit' than that for a Buddhist nun, and there is an inbuilt acceptance of a superior male spirituality.

In what are often called the semitic religions, Judaism, Islam and Christianity we see a similar pattern of male dominance or control. Islam has long had a world-wide reputation of being the religion which most persistently subdues women. The endorsement of polygamy, the practice of heavy veiling, the inequality in divorce laws in most Islamic societies, all point to women being seen as under the ownership and control of men. Judaism also is built on a patriarchal understanding of family, priestly and civic life. Women counted for less than men, even in terms of thanksgiving for the birth of a child. The Rabbinic schools were strongly male-dominant and those traditions which interpreted the Torah put out a very patriarchal world-view where women were allocated a very specific place. Then Christianity took the patriarchy of Judaism and incorporated into it more rules and limitations for women. Women were to be silent in the churches. Their prime role in life was to be domestic, and to obey their husbands.

1 It is important to recall that this paper was originally given as a voluntary session at an Open University Summer School, in a relaxed academic context, rather than as a scholarly paper. We are eavesdropping on an example of communication of the Gospel to a non-Christian group, who have been invited to a session which seeks to involve them in Christian issues which are relevant to them.

2 Suttee is the custom that a Hindu widow should throw herself on her husband's funeral pyre. It is alleged that in some remoter parts of India the custom is still practised (ed.)

It is not surprising then, that with this understanding of the underlying male dominance of all the world religions that most feminist sympathisers have written them off as simply contributing to the oppression of women. In their view they have provided the rationale for defining women according to their sexuality, (which remains very prevalent in secular society today, and is seen specifically of course in pornography). They have institutionalised and reinforced male dominance. For the argument is that patriarchy is everywhere. It operates in the Kremlin, the Broderbond, the White House, the Vatican. It undergirds all financial empires, all political systems, all communication networks, all religious institutions. Patriarchy is the expression of every religion and every '-ism'. It is there in Islam, in Marxism, in Maoism, in Catholicism. In the words of theologian Mary Daly, former Catholic turned radical feminist 'Patriarchy is the prevailing religion of the entire planet.'

I want then to examine these allegations with particular reference to the Judaeo-Christian tradition, because these are the two religions other than humanism, which have most influenced our own culture. It is Judaism and Christianity which feminists allege have most defined women in terms of sex. It is Judaism and Christianity which has also given us the most damaging concept of all, the concept of an omnipotent male god. In endowing maleness with divinity they have for all times excluded women from any expression of full authenticity within the Judaeo-Christian tradition.

Now this becomes a personal problem for me. For although I am happy to be called a feminist along with very many of you, I am also a Christian, and have stayed within the church. So I need to examine these allegations carefully, and ask myself some very probing questions: Am I worshipping maleness? am I propping up patriarchy? am I making it more difficult for women to live oppression-free lives?

The Church and Sexuality

It will be evident by now that we shall not have space to delve into every area of analysis which would prove fruitful. So in order to keep to some simple structure, and to draw boundaries round our discussion I want to focus on the single theme of the Christian Church and sexuality. I want in fact to concede straight away that the church has indeed been guilty of defining woman in terms of her sexuality, and that women's sexuality has provided the church with a number of anxieties for centuries.

The old Church Fathers have taken quite a battering for their tactless misogyny which they were foolish enough to preserve in writing for later centuries. Women were variously denounced as 'the devil's gateway', 'inflamers of lust', 'full of carnal desire', 'misbegotten men'. I often wonder what the women of their day thought of the tirades pronounced against them. I doubt if many women in the twelfth century were queuing up to kiss Odo of Cluny after his declaration that 'to embrace a woman is to embrace a sack of manure.'

Yet has it changed that much? Practices have been retained within some branches of the Church which suggested for many centuries that there was something unclean about women's sexuality. The old custom of the Churching of Women after childbirth retained a considerable amount of the old emphasis. Even in the last few months, in the context of the Church of England, we have heard arguments purporting to be against the ordination of women which are very reminiscent of the old fears of women's sexuality which underlay so many of the former attitudes. As someone mentioned to me the Bishop of London seems to have extraordinary problems, for he is on record as saying that his male instinct would lead him to take a preaching woman into his arms. There is a similar incident recorded during a particular discussion on appointing a woman deacon. One clergyman, nervous and sweating, finally brought himself to voice his deepest fears: 'What happens if she becomes pregnant?' he stammered with great anxiety. 'She has a baby' was the calm answer.

There are other cooler examples of the way women are defined in terms of sex. In the Alternative Service Book, there is an interesting catalogue of lesser saints. Francis, a monk is described simply as 'A Friar', whereas Clare who was a nun is said to have been 'A Virgin'. It is through observing attitudes and evidences such as these that some women have argued that the fear of women's sexuality has dominated many expressions of Christianity, and is still there today in many quarters of the church. It is one of the most insidious reasons why patriarchy has been so difficult to combat. For the issue is not at the level of argument, but of fears, anxieties and phobias. It has meant that the Church, more than almost any other institution in western society, has been guilty of stereotyping women. It has meant, too, that some have argued that the Church has offered women two options: sin and carnality or purity and asexuality. They can be either '*Daughters of Eve*' or '*Sisters of Mary*'.

This arises from two outstanding stereotypes of women: Eve the temptress, and Mary the Virgin. Women in their natural state are all potential seductresses. The early Church Fathers spent a lot of time warning their readers of women who would so easily inflame their lust (with rouge, rustling skirts, silk shawls or other such skilful enticements). Poor St Jerome seems to have spent much of his life in a cold sweat at the constant thought of such creatures walking around not a mile from his cloisters.

Nuns

But thankfully there were also the pure women, the chaste reflections of the Virgin Mary. Nuns were those who were seen as having renounced sexuality, fleshliness, lust, carnality and all forms of impurity. And the women who joined the many cloistered orders celebrating sisterhood in the name of their particular saint were women to be admired and commended. They, like the Mother of God, were to be perpetual virgins and therefore without the intrusion of flesh in their lives were capable of high spiritual attainment.

It is interesting to ponder whether this is an altogether accurate reading of the situation as far as the women who became nuns understood it. Clearly some of them did subscribe to the 'image of Mary' view. But there is also evidence that for some of these women joining a religious order was a way out of patriarchy and into some female autonomy. In the Convent they escaped from the paternalism of both priest and husband, and could concentrate on simply being Christian women. Indeed some of the women who have left us their writing – St Theresa of Avila is one – stand out as having strong minds of their own, and enjoying a close relationship with God without the intervention of the male hierarchy of the church. However, for whatever reason such women were applauded (and frequently canonised) in the Church. They were truly Sisters of Mary. It is interesting to reflect incidentally, how the popular image of a nun became part and parcel of music hall jokes. A nun was supposed to connote innocence, a total ignorance of sex. And so the version of Christian holiness which defined it as *asexuality* was thus endorsed by the Church and accepted in popular mythology.

Of course the ideal offered to women of being like the Virgin Mary is intrinsically problematic. Only the women who were perpetual virgins could begin to qualify. But in the end of course the comparison defied all women. For it is fundamentally impossible for anyone else to be both a mother and a virgin. Mary was for ever out of sight for all those who wanted to become mothers, and also out of sight in the end for all those who didn't. Mary could in fact be revered to the extent to which she was revered by the Catholic Church precisely because she had no rivals.

Witches

The other category of women I have referred to in my title did not enjoy the approval of the Church; the witches who emerged apparently in such overwhelming numbers in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were the very embodiment of all that was evil in womanhood. It was St Jerome's wildest nightmare come true. The Christian Church, both in Europe and the new American colonies, became obsessed with witch-hunting, and a fascination with the menace of witchcraft spread through both Catholicism and Protestantism.

Many allegations were made: witches were held to be in possession of magical powers; they were alleged among other things to ruin crops, produce death, blindness, infant mortality and male impotence; they were in evil league with the animal kingdom, and had power over the elements; their curses could produce terrifying results and were often uttered purely from malice or whim. Witches were in fact the very opposite to the chaste, pure nuns; they were evil, demonic, and full of carnal sexuality.

The massive witch-hunts of this period have of course been well documented. They seemed to have started in the Alps but spread quite quickly through Europe. In 1577 alone Toulouse sent 400 witches to the flames. Between 1587 and 1593 twenty two villages in the region of Trier

burned 368 witches. In England and Scotland they were executed rather more humanely by hanging, probably because of the Puritan influence, but here again the 'trials' were a mockery and women were at the mercy of men who appointed themselves as witch specialists. One Scot was reported to have confessed before his own execution that he had 'been the death of 220 women' for whose exposure as 'witches' he had been paid twenty shillings each. A similar reaction of terror occurred in New England, and in Salem, Massachusetts a large portion of their female population lost their lives in the purge.

The Dominicans were amongst the first to become involved in the issue of witches. The most authoritative manual, written by two Dominican friars, Heinrich Kramer and Jacob Sprenger in 1486, had gone through fourteen editions at least by 1520, and is amazingly still available in modern translation. The *Malleus Malificarum* (Hammer of Witches) locates the cause of witchcraft as woman's carnality 'All witchcraft comes from carnal lust which is in women insatiable'. They also catalogued some of the 'findings' which had been revealed to them. One of the reported activities of witches was apparently to collect 'male members' which they would keep together, as many as twenty at a time, in a bird's nest or a little box, where they would 'move around of their own accord and eat corn and oats.'

It is of course extraordinary that so many women should have been suspected of witchcraft during this period. Many theories have been devised to account for the phenomenon. *Who* were the women branded as witches?

Some quite probably were the genuine article. There has always been some expression of the demonic through the ages, and no doubt this did occur at this time also. But other women (although I have no evidence for this) could have been expressing what we today call 'charismatic gifts' – healing, prophesying – and been grossly misunderstood. Other women were clearly 'old wives' whose days of childbearing were over, and others were simply women who had been caught up in the general persecution. I tend towards the view that the majority of them had been midwives: because women's sexuality was threatening and mysterious those who were associated with it in an intimate way were regarded also as threatening. Childbirth, blood, the uterus were all part of the fascination with the unknown and were the object of many superstitions. Many of the poor women who perished in the flames in the sixteenth century were probably simply being punished for knowing more than the men knew about gynaecology.

The argument, then, that is so often levelled, is that Christianity stereotypes women in terms of their sexuality and, because of its intrinsic patriarchy, uses this against them in order to keep control in male hands. But now the time has come to ask, Is Christianity intrinsically patriarchal? Is this way of stereotyping women sexually and presenting them the option of being Daughters of Eve or Sisters of Mary fundamentally in keeping with the Christian faith?

Patriarchy?

I propose to argue that it is not, first because for something to be Christian it would have to also be in keeping with a basic biblical position; second, because it would also have to reflect something of the nature and character of the founder of the Christian faith, Jesus Christ. My argument is that this view of women fails on both those accounts.

To consider the Biblical evidence first, neither Eve nor Mary has received very accurate treatment. The point of the passage in which Eve is first mentioned is simply to tell us that God made the world good until people messed it up. Eve is not presented as a temptress, or a seducer or as anything particularly sexual at all. She is simply the one who, along with Adam, was guilty of disobeying God and in doing so brought disorder and misery into the world. She is not in any sense the archetypal evil woman just waiting to lure some pure undefiled and unsuspecting man into bed. She is simply strong willed and, like the man, prefers to do what she wants rather than what God had designed in their best interests.

The Biblical version of Mary also is quite different. She is not otherworldly, ethereal and asexual, as all those very holy pictures suggest. The Gospel records show her to be an active, anxious woman who far from being a perpetual virgin went on to have a number of children after Christ had been born, all of whom seemed to come into the world in a perfectly normal way. She had a very special relationship with Christ, and in fact on one occasion actually seemed to ignore what he said and told the servants to get ready for him to perform a miracle because the wine had run out. She was clearly a woman of pluck and energy, and someone whom Jesus cared for very deeply, even when he was dying. There is no evidence in the Bible that Mary herself was 'immaculately conceived'. She did not need to be. The Virgin Birth occurred because of the special nature of the Child who was being born, not because Mary herself was free from all sexuality. There was nothing wrong with sexuality. Throughout the Bible sex is not despised or feared, but is celebrated and endorsed. Women's sexuality is seen there as something God has made, and is not to be abused, but respected.

But it is when we come to look at the founder of Christianity that we see how far off target the views that I have been discussing really are. I want to look at Jesus Christ's relationship with three women as they are recorded in the New Testament. I have chosen these three because they all focus in some way on women's sexuality and they bring out the difference so strikingly between the popular view and the reality.

The first is about a woman with a haemorrhage (Luke 8:43-48): Jesus is on his way to heal a sick girl when he passes a woman in the crowd who has some menstrual disorder (incidentally, isn't it interesting how even period problems are seen as significant enough to get a mention in the Bible?). She should not even be in the crowd because there was a Jewish taboo at that time about menstruation, and she is in danger of defiling any male Jewish leader present. Nevertheless, she goes as far up to Jesus as she dares to and

touches the very hem of the cloak he is wearing. Immediately her bleeding stops and she knows she is cured. But then comes the tricky bit because Jesus asks who touched him. And she has a real dilemma. She's afraid, because to own up means she is admitting to having defiled him. In fact when she does acknowledge what she has done, his words cut across all the rituals and tell her simply to go in peace, and that her faith has healed her.

The next story is about a Samaritan woman who has had a decidedly 'sexually active' life, in that she has been divorced by five husbands and is now living with someone who has not married her (John 4:7-26). She is standing by the well; Jesus is thirsty and he asks her for a drink. That in itself is extraordinary because he should not be asking any Samaritan for a drink, let alone a woman. Even his disciples are surprised when they see him with her. So is she, but they begin a conversation during which he tells her he is the Messiah. That conversation itself is very interesting. Very often Jesus speaks to people in parables – simple stories with a meaning to them. Here he engages in a deep theological discussion – he pays the woman the compliment of talking on a level that she wants to understand. In fact he also reveals that he knows a lot about her, and she is so amazed by the whole encounter that she goes and finds her neighbours to tell them whom she has met.

The third story is told in Luke 7:36-50. Jesus is eating at the house of one of the important religious leaders, and a woman comes in and starts to pour expensive perfume over his feet. She weeps, and her tears wash the perfume in, and eventually she lets down her hair to dry his feet. Now two particular aspects of the story interest us here. One is the way in which the woman clearly identifies with Jesus over against the hosts of the meal who have not paid him the usual courtesies of greeting, foot washing and so on. Her emotional outburst seems to have been triggered off partly by her identification with this humiliating treatment and partly from her own sense of deep love and gratitude to him. The other interesting point is how Jesus handles the situation and deals with the critics. Their reaction has been that this is all rather sexual and disgusting, and his response is to remind them of their own lack of courtesy towards him, and to point to how the woman has compensated for all that. She has shown open concern, and expressed her sense of deep peace and forgiveness by pouring out this love for him so overwhelmingly. Far from being embarrassed by her, Jesus accepts this effusive closeness as very beautiful.

In none of these examples does Jesus show any trauma at being so close to a woman's sexuality. And in the context of first century Palestine this is remarkable in so many ways. He cuts across myths about women, and religious taboos in order to encounter them as people and show them real respect and dignity.

What does this all mean? I think it means that Jesus, as God in human flesh, represents to us what God's view of women is really like. It is not harsh, fearful or patriarchal but loving. I think also it cuts across the fre-

quent portrayal of women as fools or 'tainted', to showing women simply as human, and full of different characteristics. I think finally that it illustrates that it was women as well as men to whom Jesus had brought the good news, the good news that we can have peace with God and release from the ways of life which are destructive. Women throughout the New Testament and beyond found that peace through the life and death of Christ.

So we are left with one question: if the patriarchal views of women and the stereotyping of women's sexuality are not essential to Christianity why did they ever occur there in the first place? My conclusion will have to be brief. Basically I am convinced that this view of sexuality came because of the impact of Greek dualist philosophy which saw the world in terms of Form- Matter, Soul- Body. The elevation of the material over the non-material and the rational 'soul' over the material 'body' crept into Christianity through people like Augustine; it was taken over into later scholasticism and is still there today. The belief that the non-material 'soul' is imprisoned within a base material 'body' can still be found in popular mythology, but it is a Greek idea and not a biblical one. What has made it so pronounced in the area of gender is that women quickly became the ones identified with the material, bodily, sexual, form of life, whereas men became associated with the rational, and soul aspect. My thesis is that many of the problems within Christianity owe their origins to fusion in the early Church Fathers of Christian thought with Greek pagan ideas.¹

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1 The lecture was followed by questions and discussion, raising such issues as why Christ came as a man, why people are cured by appearances of Mary, the Virgin Birth and the Immaculate Conception; what about chauvinists in the Bible like St. Paul? Could a woman ever be Pope? Why are there so many hierarchies in the Church? Why does the Church hardly ever get involved in issues of justice? What evidence points to the Resurrection? Are there any books written to help people understand the Bible?(!)