Religion and gender

by

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There is a certain relation between any religious unit and its power to direct the movement of its most precious human resource, women....

Dominique Zahan[1]

Religion and Gender

Human beings are born with biological sex, but they become a gender. Biological sex is simply the number and arrangement of human chromosomes, an arrangement which determines external sex characteristics. Gender, however, is the way in which the social relations of a society, economic, political, familial and religious, are divided by that society for the different sexes.

Religion is the repository of the values held to be of supreme importance in a given society. Religious texts, rituals, rules and even, in theocratic societies, laws dictate the conduct deemed appropriate. The gender divisions of society occupy a large place in all the major religions around the world. In fact, "ethnographers have provided richly detailed descriptions of myths, rituals, and everyday life in societies that are preoccupied with separating men and women."[2]

Gender and Religious Symbolism

The division of human beings into two biological sexes has had a strong impact on the development of human consciousness. The fact that human beings have two separate sets of external sex characteristics and perform different reproductive functions has become a social and religious metaphor for difference.

Religious language, rituals, roles, and symbols draw on this powerful human experience of sex differentiation and use it as a metaphor for division or separation. This metaphorical religious function of gender in religion has generated powerful religious symbols organized by sex difference.

There have been several unfortunate consequences of this use of a powerful symbol of human existence: the value ascribed to each sex has not been equal, the emphasis on difference has obscured the way in which sexual difference is not the only human characteristic and that human beings, male and female, are more alike than different, and it has often made heterosexuality equivalent to the order of the cosmos.

A Hierarchy of Religious Value

In the past, women from all traditions have been regarded not only as inferior beings who were not likely to have the capacity to experience ultimate reality, but also as actual obstacles to men’s spiritual progress.[3]
The sociological work on what has been called the axial age provides some important clues to the context that produced the "higher" religions, especially in Mesopotamia and Asia. These would be Judaism, and later Christianity and Islam, Buddhism, Confucianism, Hinduism and the Greco-Roman religions. These are all religions which made transcendental claims to universality beyond tribes or clans and which emerged in the midst of the rise of imperial civilizations with the attendant extensive military activity, famines and migrations, highly stratified societies, political ideologies of imperialism and the other social chaos that follows warfare.[4]

Religions have changed enormously in three millennia, obviously. But the peculiar relation of women and religion dates from the very formative period of these world religions. What is also important to note is that the religious critics of the social injustices caused by the rise of imperial civilizations, the Hebrew prophets, Gautama Buddha, Confucius, Plato, and Jesus of Nazareth among others, also emerged during this period. One might even argue that part of the genesis of these religions was a protest against the injustices caused by the rise of imperial civilizations.

Religion also consolidates its power during the chaotic period of the axial age. Religious power came to be vested not in kinship and custom, but in systems based on abstract ideologies and preternatural powers that devalue the natural world as incomplete, inferior and in need of transformation. These religions come to assert vertical cosmologies, transcendent rational and supernatural spiritual principles that give them hierarchal leverage in criticizing their political rivals. They stress "the existence of a higher, transcendental moral of metaphysical order that is beyond this worldly or otherworldly reality."[5]

Because spiritual power is removed from ordinary planetary and human life cycles, a fundamental and unstable tension is created. Salvation is needed from the physical conditions of consciousness. There emerges a chasm between the natural and the supernatural world and the human being must have his or her consciousness reconstructed according to precepts of the higher moral or metaphysical order. While the concept of immortality in these civilizations may or may not still be tied to bodily images and to ideas of physical resurrection, the very possibility of some continuity beyond this world...was always torn by many internal tensions.[6]

The religious elites control access to this salvation, even as they define it. It becomes their leverage both into the power of and against the abuse of political systems.

This abstract split between transcendental religion and the actual world takes on crucial importance when the actual world is dominated by political systems which are dehumanizing and totalitarian. The religion of the Hebrew prophets and of Jesus of Nazareth and his community are scathing critiques of divine kingship and totalitarian rulers. Gautama Buddha and his monks walked away from political power to seek spiritual answers to suffering, and Confucian scholars created a political philosophy of benevolent order out of the midst of a century of warring chaos in China. Justice, liberation, benevolence, and compassion became important principles by which to measure and to compete with for loyal followers. It is not accident that in contemporary interfaith dialogue, common ethical concerns have been noticed in the world’s higher religions.

Yet these religious innovations used the metaphor of sexual difference to symbolize the natural order and the higher order. Rather than depicting abusive political power or militarism as the problem, they use women metaphorically to symbolize the problematic world, the natural world of illness, chaos and death and link these to sexual desire and the 'flesh.' Women, as women, have little place in these systems which ground salvation in the transcendence of the body and of the earth itself. The world of women is held to be the world of menstruation, of birth, of sexuality, of food and of struggle with sickness and death. These are the worlds left outside of these new religious systems. Women, as symbols of the body, are taken to be all that must be left behind to achieve a pure spiritual knowledge. Reality becomes abstractly defined.[7]
In the so-called "higher religions," then, female sexuality becomes a symbol for the natural order, the cycle of birth and death and ultimately the symbol of what is antithetical to the "spiritual," or indeed the antithesis of what is most profoundly religious.

Summary and Discussion Proposal

Gender is a symbol for human difference. Employed religiously, this difference has been given a different value with the male assigned to represent the transcendent or spiritual realm, the female to represent the natural plane. The origins of modern religions in the social and political turmoil of the axial age today arrange human society in both the public spheres of political, religious and economic activity and the private spheres of home and family in hierarchical power relations with men deemed to be of more value than women.

Yet, all these religions contain strong traditions of protest against inequality, injustice and the abuse of social and political power. How can we take these traditions of protest against inequality, injustice and the abuse of social and political power and begin to apply them to the situation of women in our societies? The challenge to the unequal power relations of women and men in religion and society is the challenge to explore our religious traditions for these subversive elements.

Endnotes


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