



Religion gender and public discourse

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This paper is an attempt to clarify key concepts around the present forum topic by means of questions. The aim is to stimulate further discussion on the key issues raised.

RELIGION

What is religion? It is a system of beliefs and values through which people define themselves, their reason for being or why they exist and their purpose in life. It both reflects and shapes a perception of reality and as such, it is bound to culture (Jakubiak & Murphy 1987). It is a search to explain and order existence.

Church, which is always confused with religion, is the external institutionalisation of a belief system- a religion. Churches codify, organise, and make systematic, the dogmas and protocol behaviour of given religions and are as culture bound as the religions they represent (1987:157). The sacred scriptures in these churches (as we will later observe, play a role in the formulation of church dogmas). Daly's (1985) definition of church is instructive for the present discussion: church, refers to all churches (in all religions) and other institutionalised manifestations of patriarchal religion.

It appears that institutionalised religion added salt to the fire in as far as the women's question (gender issues) is / are concerned. Why would this be the case? Which role did the sacred scriptures and the doctrines formulated from them for example, play, in the social injustices done on the female sex? Which role did chauvinistic religion hermeneutics play, in defining the sacred and the profane (cf Erickson 1993)? How may we distinguish between the authority of the Word of God (who is mostly pictured as a man- cf the role played by language in religious discourse) and the authority of the servants of God who are mostly men? In some cases, these servants are regarded as "gods"!

According to Daly (1985), patriarchy is the prevailing religion of the entire planet. Is she right or is this an over-reaction?

For the purposes of this paper, the concepts "religion" and "church" will not be used to refer to a particular religion or church, they will refer to all religions and churches though we acknowledge the danger of generalisations. Here and there, therefore, particular religions will be singled out to highlight certain aspects.

The question worth noting at this stage is: Is religion or should religion be a public discourse? Shouldn't it be reserved for private purposes as some have argued? If the answer to the latter is yes, how would we account for a large number of people who refuse to see it as a matter of private belief and practice and derive their political opinions and actions from religious commitments (Parekh 1997:21)? Or are they expected to bracket their faith life when they are for example, in parliament, court, at a University and resume their spirituality while back in their private cocoons? What about those people whose worldview does not know any compartmentalisation of life into the religious, political, economic, social and so forth? People with a holistic view of life? Isn't religion having a role to play even in a secular state like South

Africa? The words of Parekh (1997:21) may be instructive in this regard:

While secularism must remain an important voice in political life, it cannot be allowed to be the only one. Religion has much to say of great relevance about the good life, personal responsibility, family values, social justice, global redistribution, the environment and other issues that dominate contemporary public agenda. *We must therefore find new ways of giving it a valued public presence and role* (Italics-mine).

Which ways may we consider in our attempt to give religion a public presence and role?

Having said all this, let us recall that from the preceding discussion, we noted that religion is patriarchal in nature. It is therefore important to ask: Is patriarchal religion worthy of public delivery and consumption? If so, in which way? Does a religion which needs transformation have the capacity to transform society? Can a violent religion provide solutions to violence in society?

GENDER AND/OR FEMINISM

What is gender? Simply, a person's sex. Which sex are we concerned about in this discourse? "...the second sex" (Daly 1978). Why is this the case? Due to the universal history of the elevation of the male gender over and above the female one, in most cases discourses focusing on gender issues (like the present one), are basically concerned with the female gender or with women's marginalised conditions with a view to their liberation. This therefore pertains to social justice. Issues pertaining to social justice like gender issues, are or should essentially be part of public discourse, particularly in a democratic country like South Africa. We cannot however, focus on the female gender without necessarily focusing on the male one. Focus will therefore basically be on the relationships between the genders, particularly on how religion has and still continues to shape them.

Feminism (a gender-oriented discourse) or rather broadly speaking, women's liberation texts or discourses is the key philosophy on gender issues. Due to the specific or limited nature of the concept "feminism", the present text will use the broader phrase "women's liberation discourses" for more inclusively. The more broader phrase will include other women's liberation frameworks like *Womanism*, *Mujerista* and *Bosadi* (Womanhood) discourses and those which though operative, do not have names yet or may never be named. However, seeing that much has already been written on feminism, the latter will now and again surface in this text though it should (unless otherwise specified) be understood in a more inclusive way.

What are women's liberation discourses? Jakubiak and Murphy (1987:158) describes feminism as fundamentally, a philosophy of equal opportunity.

These gender-sensitive discourses focus on the experiences of women as marginalised others, as people who remain resident aliens though like men, they are full humans with full human dignity. They aim at the liberation of women from all systems that inhibit the realisation of their potential as full human beings. These gender-sensitive discourses criticise patriarchy and its misogynistic tendencies revealed in both the private and the public spheres. Feminism permeates all spheres-education, politics, economics, language, religion and so forth. The present paper will basically focus on the interaction between religion and gender as public discourses.

One of the assumptions of this paper is that there is no universal woman's experience (Pui Lan 1993), hence the different definitions of patriarchy by women from different contexts (cf Schüssler-Fiorenza 1992).

PUBLIC DISCOURSE

The word "public" refers to people as a whole, a group of people having common interests; as adjective, it has the following meaning, "affecting people as a whole".

The word "discourse" refers to a conversation or a talk. It can also refer to a formal and usually extended expression of thought on a subject or simply, a formal treatment of a subject in speech or writing. Public discourse therefore means public talk or conversation, or simply, talk by the people. It also refers to a formal treatment of a subject either in speech or in writing meant for the public (Merriam-Webster 1995; Neufeldt 1989).

In the present discussion, the phrase "public discourse" will be used in both senses, that is, as public talk, a talk not meant for private purposes, a talk by the people, the members of the public. The latter definition advantages those who do not have the capacity to "treat" the topic in a "formal" way either by speech or by writing (cf the second definition). This is particularly relevant if we think about the many women at the margins of South African society who can neither read nor write but who (thanks to their oral cultures) can talk!

It will also be used in the sense of a formal treatment of a subject either in speech or in writing.

RELIGION AND GENDER

In the light of the above definitions of religion and gender, it is important to ask the following question: Can religion and gender be reconciled to each other? Can the two make a worthy combination as marriage partners? These questions are particularly relevant if we consider how religion or religious discourse has been used to marginalise women. Will it be an exaggeration to argue that religion has been and is still one of the root causes of women's subordination and marginalisation? Isn't Shrock right when she argues: "The mandate is clear that the suppression of women is a reality, and that from a historical perspective, religion has been substantially responsible for the devalued position of women"(1984:56).

The following statements and or snippets from the sacred scriptures of various religions will hopefully bring to light the intensity of Shrock's words. We noted previously that in order to codify and organise their dogmas, churches make use of their sacred scriptures. Which images of "woman" do we glean from these scriptures?

The Jewish and Christian account of creation has historically been used to reinforce the women's subordinate position. Some have called Gen 3:16: "the law of subordination" "...Thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over you"(1984:52). Stone (1976: 7) in her book "When God was a Woman", comments about this passage as follows: "My penitent submissive position as a female was firmly established by the page three of the nearly thousand pages of the Judeo-Christian Bible".

In her excellent analysis of religion, Psychologist Gina Cerminara wrote that the Jewish rabbis were of the idea that women were not mentally capable of understanding the profound nature of religious matters: "Better burn the Law than teach it to a woman... I thank God that I was born a man and not a woman"(cf Shrock 1984:51).

According to Cerminara (1973; cf Shrock 1987: 53) in the Koran, male supremacy was even stronger at times than in Judaism or Christianity; it was proposed "that women probably have no souls" (Vaerting & Vaerting, 1923:175). The Koran, Sura 4:31 reads: "Men have authority over women because God has made the one superior to the other".

Some conservative Jainus in Hinduism, will not make room for women ascetics for they believe that women will never be saved until they become reborn as men (King 1987:39).

Anne Bancroft asks the following questions from a Buddhist feminist perspective: "Why are women

content to be looked upon as religiously inferior beings? This question applies to all religions. Men ordain each other in hierarchical formation. Why are women prepared to wait perhaps indefinitely, for that grudging approval by men which will result in their feet being placed on the ladder too? Why do not women take the whole issue into their own hands and ordain each other, or start a church which has no need for ordination?(1987:6)

Are Bancroft's questions worth pursuing by those who are concerned with social injustices done against women in various religions? Shouldn't these questions be among those top on the list of the religion public agenda?

In African traditional religions, the situation is however different in that though African societies are patriarchal, beyond death, a family's ancestors, whether male or female, are acknowledged as mediators to *Modimo* (the Supreme One). Noteworthy also is the fact that the word used for God (cf the Northern Sotho, *Modimo*) is gender-neutral.

Haven't such "religious" statements on the "divinely" ordained inferior status of women versus the superior status of men done much harm to the womenfolk the world over? Aren't these statements revealing that the sacred scriptures of a particular religion, are as culture-bound as the religion itself? Is Shrock not right when she argues that ".. These and similar religious attitudes have been responsible for society regarding women as intellectually limited and for keeping women from achieving their real aspirations and less able to resolve their personal concerns" (1984:55)? Is she not right when she argues that ideas such as these have had obvious detrimental consequences in stereotyping male and female roles and they make for interesting but difficult relationship in career counseling sessions? Isn't the latter argument further throwing light on the fact that issues pertaining to gender and religion should of necessity form part of public discourse?

It might be a rewarding exercise to critically discuss the above statements and the implications they have had and continue to have on women's and men's self-images. Such images of necessity affect society's every day lives including productivity in all spheres, with the sphere of religion being no exception.

May the undesirable interaction between religion (particularly institutionalised religion) and women portrayed in the above references be allowed to continue in any society, particularly if the latter is committed to democracy? Doesn't such a state of affairs reveal the urgent need for philosophies that are gender-sensitive like women's liberation discourses to be allowed to criticise the patriarchal status quo at large and in religion in particular? Isn't there a pressing need for gendered religion? As the matter of the marginalisation of a part of humanity by another part of the same concerns all of us, it must of necessity be part of the agenda of public discourse (whatever form the latter takes: sermons, school and University lectures/curricula, parliamentary talk/speeches, constitutions, scientific articles, et cetera).

How valuable are such gender-sensitive philosophies like women's liberation philosophies if applied to religion or studies in religion? Which impact may such approaches have on our understanding of the authority and the political nature of the sacred scriptures in different religions? Which impact may such studies make on our understanding of how religion has been used and continue to be used to order society?

Didn't religion help effectively to highlight the DIFFERENCES between male and female? The latter has basically been negatively defined: inferior, profane, temptress, subordinate, property, less human and so forth. As a weaker vessel, she needs a man who should rule over her. The image of man is positive though, he is head, a full human being, master of the house, the church and the public, owner, servant of the Divine and therefore sacred. Aren't these images revealing that in religion, patriarchy, rather than the Divine is being worshipped? Can we go beyond patriarchy (cf Cooley et al 1991) and come up with a more balanced way or worshipping the Supreme Other (*Modimo*)? Are men and women as different as patriarchal religion has made us to believe?

Tavard's question may be worth noting in this regard: "Are maleness and femaleness...two aspects of humanity which are shared, though unequally, by all persons?" (1987:5) We may even ask with E(ras)mus

van Niekerk: "Does belief have two genders?"

Doesn't the present state of affairs in which religion has interacted or has been made to interact with woman mostly in a negative way, necessitate that a public discourse on Gender and Religion in South Africa must happen? Though it has happened, it has not yet taken root in this country. Isn't this state of affairs an awkward one in the sense that on the one hand, there is this part of the public (or women) that is so much into religious and or spiritual matters (some studies have revealed that women are more religious than men; (cf Miller and Hoffmann 1995) while their experiences or what should be their experiences with the Divine, is mostly interpreted in a foreign way by those who are outside their experiences, that is men?

While there is a need to redefine womanhood and manhood in all spheres of life in South Africa, from the preceding discussion, it would appear that the need is more urgent in religion in particular. This is even the more so if we consider that religion, in some contexts, permeates all of life.

How may we make gender a key issue in religion? How may we reconstruct, rethink, reformulate aspects of our religious traditions which have legitimated and continue to legitimate women's oppression? How may gendered religion be purposefully made part of public discourse? Which gender must play a significant role in this necessary transformation of religion?

In our attempt to restructure religion, we might also benefit by considering the following questions on sexuality (cf Timmerman 1984) in the light of religion transformation:

Sexuality is a discourse which deals with sex, the sex organs and the sexes. The questions that follow will basically focus on women's sexuality. How did religion define sexuality, particularly women's sexuality? Which impact did religion make on sexuality and bodies, particularly women's bodies? How may we redefine sexuality and procreation? How can we address the question of the abuse of the "weaker" by the "stronger" in the name of sexual passion or right? How does religion / church address the issue of violence against women?

Can human sexuality be seen as a question of social justice? Are women as persons fully capable of sexual feeling? How does religion deal with issues of birth control, abortion and rape?

How may religion address the patriarchal form of marriage? How may religion start addressing seriously, issues pertaining to women's "submission" and men's "headship"?

Should wife beating and child abuse continue to fall within the category of private matters that patriarchal society including the church, chooses not to control? Which role may religion play in disempowering women from the private sphere with a view to empowering them in the public sphere?

Though religion has mostly been used against women (as this paper has hopefully revealed), it does have positive or liberative, life-giving aspects for women. Is this not one of the main reasons why many women cling to it? Religion, if properly defined and applied, can be useful for the liberation of all marginalised people, including those who have been marginalised on the basis of their gender. It only calls for a committed humanity, both women and men, to make this come to pass. Are we dedicated to make this happen? If so, how may we do this?

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