

Strategies for Change in Christian Churches

By Lois Wilson

Violence against women in religion is sometimes thought of as sexual abuse of women by clergy. While it cannot be denied that this exists, the list of evidence of violence against women in religious communities is much more lengthy. At a recent Canada-wide seminar of women on "Religion and Violence," the list included 29 items, most of which could be included under these headings: the traditional dominant teaching that legitimizes patriarchy; denial to women of access to decision-making, including ordination in some churches; non inclusive language in liturgy; ecclesiastical politics that exclude women from key committees; interpretation of scripture that understands God as male, and Eve the seductress, as female; control of the sexuality of women and related functions; and the internalization of the virtues of obedience and passiveness by women themselves. Much of our Western theological heritage has been an accomplice to sexual violation and violence of this order. The silence is now being broken.

There are significant strategies for change being put in place. Let me tell you of the ones known to me.

First, tradition is being recovered in such a way that not only the misogynist teachings of the Church Fathers are exposed, but also the more enlightened views of historic women whose teachings have been submerged for centuries. St. Augustine said that "women experience rape with pleasure and get what they deserve." John Calvin taught that violence and tyranny at home are a woman's lot that needs

to be endured and not opposed. Tertullian (200 AD) defined "women as the devil's gateway." St. Thomas Aquinas thought women were "misbegotten males." These traditions are deeply embedded in Western thought and culture.

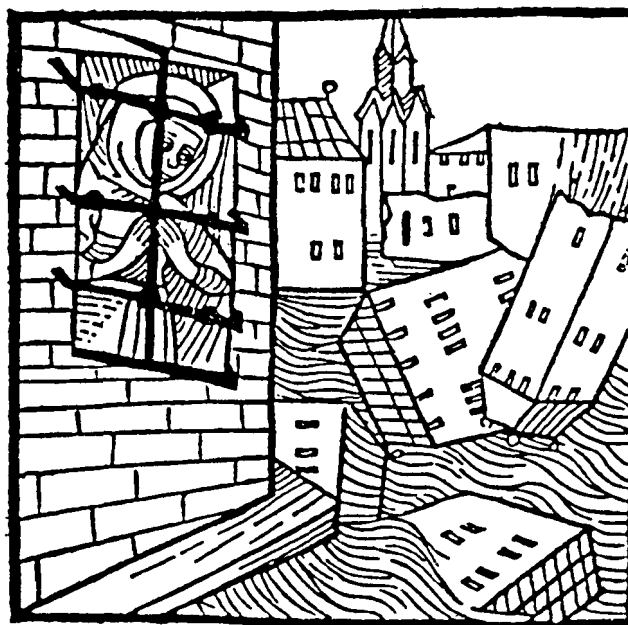
On the other hand, stories are now being recalled of the two Biblical midwives, Puah and Shiprah, who claimed power and subversively undermined the Pharaoh's order to murder all the baby Hebrew boys; of Miriam, who "knew where the water was" and after whose death, a drought came upon the land; of Marthana, a fifth-century administrator who was the superior of a monastery for both men and women; of the Byzantine Empress Theodora who freed the prostitutes of Constantinople from the dungeons assigned to them by the men who used them; of Catherine of Siena who counseled a Pope, whether or not he wanted counsel; of Teresa of Avila, who reformed the

church whether or not it was said it should be reformed or not. Women's submerged history is becoming part of "tradition."

Secondly, feminist theology is bringing fresh eyes not only to "tradition," but to dominant classical theology as well, which grew out of a context that was thoroughly male. Feminist theologians are calling for quite a different approach that arises out of women's struggles. They see human relationships not as a pyramid but as a circle of mutuality, in which feeling and emotion are as valid as incisive thinking. They affirm Biblical tradition, heal the body/spirit split, affirm sexuality. At the 7th Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Australia in February, 1991, a 35 year-old South Korean feminist theologian, Dr. Chung, set the cat among the pigeons by calling for an abandonment of the androcentrism of old in favour of a life-centred theology that includes human

and non human alike; for an abandonment of the dualistic split of mind and matter, earth and heaven, in favour of the interconnectedness of all of life; and for a return to a life-focussed theology, rather than one preoccupied with death. She drew on her head charges of "syncretism" and "heresy" by invoking the spirit of Kwan In, who is popularly venerated in Korea as a goddess of compassion and wisdom. She put squarely on the table the question of adapting Christianity to a particular culture. There was passionate applause, but there was also passionate silence.

Thirdly, in former times, Christians asked the ultimate question of meaning in terms of death or guilt. But now, in the twentieth century, the question is being asked



From *Heiligenlegenden* (Esslingen, Urach, 1481)

not only in those terms, but also in terms of “where can I find authentic human community that will affirm me in my sexuality, my culture, my race, but also bring me into life-giving and sustaining relationships with others?” While everything is interrelated and interdependent, yet everything is also different from everything else. Individuality and interrelatedness are features of the universe: hence no voice or single species is the only one that counts. Women are asking whether the religious communities can restore the focus of religion to the healing of divisions and the creation of human community? Can the focus be clearly on human and non-human relationships, or will the institutions continue to preoccupy themselves with private individual matters or with comfort and security only?

Fourthly, feminist theologians bring fresh eyes to interpret scripture, the key being women’s struggles for justice and community, and the common hope and experience of liberation. It cannot be denied that the Bible is an androcentric text written by men in a patriarchal context. Some reject it all as being beyond redemption. There is another way however. It is an historical re-reading of the text and of extra-Biblical traditions in order to retrace the struggle of our forefathers, to reappropriate their victories, to acknowledge their defeats, to expose the patriarchal context that occasioned their defeats, and to read it all as our own submerged history. A Catholic theologian, Elizabeth Shussler Fiorenza writes that women should approach scripture with the “hermeneutics of suspicion” as though a label were affixed, “CAUTION — this may be dangerous to your health and well-being.” She writes that a systematic analysis of androcentric texts is not enough. It must be accompanied by suspicion that understands androcentric texts as “ideological articulations of men expressing as well as maintaining patriarchal historical conditions.” What women are discovering is that much of scripture, and particularly early church history, was written from the perspective of the “historical winners” and that what must be done is to recapture the dimension of past sufferings and defeats so as to open up a new path for the future. “A Women’s Commentary

on the Bible” is well underway, with publication slated for the mid nineties. National and international networks of feminist theologians are in place. My present work is writing for small children, Bible stories informed by contemporary feminist theological scholarship.

Fifthly, women are moving into leadership positions in religious institutions. Protestant churches in Canada are ordaining more and more women as theological professors. In Latin America, the “base communities,” communities of the poor, are usually headed by women. In June, 1988, the first-ever-in-history consultation of women from nine historic faith communities was held in Toronto sponsored by the World Council of Churches. As one participant put it, “I can imagine what it might be like not to be a Westerner, not to be Christian, not to be white. What I can’t imagine is what it would be like NOT to be a woman!” Instead of producing a written report to be filed, the proceedings were videotaped and made widely available around the world.

The women of the World Council of Churches (315 Protestant and Orthodox churches world wide, with Vatican representation) have a hard time. Picture the heads of all Christian Churches (all male) in one room and you have the picture. Yet the women had the Council launch “The Ecumenical Decade of Churches in Solidarity with Women.” The emphasis in Canada is on “Women under Racism” and

“The Feminization of Poverty.”

They developed a strong women’s caucus. Before any meeting, the women meet ahead of time in order to learn each other’s names. Then they look over the agenda to seek what issues affecting women need to be added to the agenda, and which issues already on the agenda need to be addressed by women. Then they decide on who is going to move the motion, who is going to second it, and who is going to get to the microphone to support the issue before a male takes over the floor. The caucus has become strong enough to expose male heads of churches who intimidate women delegates from allowing their names to go forward for governing boards, and to have the Council establish a public grievance procedure for incidents of sexual harassment or assault.

Liturgies are being modified, so that, for example, fewer brides will be “given away” by their fathers. Scholarships are being established to enable young women to get their doctorates in theology and teach feminist theology to future priests and clergy.

Recently I attended a theological convocation at which each candidate for ordination had the choice as to whether he/she would carry two carnations in the procession. The yellow one mourned those churches that still refuse to ordain women; the pink one, those whose churches refuse ordination to homosexuals or lesbians.

Public acts of protest such as this are an appropriation of power.

The most pertinent question for women will be whether they cut themselves a piece of the ecclesiastical pie and climb the ladder to bishoprics, or whether they focus spiritual energies on personal and societal transformation.

Women’s foremost strategy is to tell a new story about a common experience of struggle and suffering, one that proposes an alternative world view, full of hope and power.

Lois Wilson, Moderator of the United Church of Canada (1980-82) and President of the World Council of Churches (1983-91), is currently the McGeachy Senior Scholar at the United Church of Canada.



From Angela of Foligno, *Libellus spiritualis doctrine* (1521)