opening the cage: stories of church and gender


sisters in spirit:
mormon women in historical and cultural perspective


clergy women and their worldviews


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Many women experience some sort of divine force or forces. Many words are used to describe it: such as goddess, female principle, Anat, Baal, God, Y-w-h, Christ, Allah, Buffalo Woman to name but a few. None of these words adequately describe, name or characterize the divinity we experience. Men's attempt to name the divine has not been any better, but unfortunately has become the norm of most western religious experience. In other words, the way men understand God and organize themselves is how we have been taught to speak about God and structure our places of worship respectively.

Opening the Cage, Sisters in Spirit and Clergy Women and their Worldviews are three distinctive studies about women's struggle to work within their patriarchal Christian churches. These books do not offer alternatives to their churches. They do, however, confirm that while our history binds us to our oppression, our religion binds us to our history.

Margaret Ann Franklin and Ruth Sturmejones have edited Opening the Cage to focus on church and gender issues. All of the writers (13 women and 3 men) live in Australia or New Zealand, and belong to the Church of England, the Roman Catholic or the United Church. The parameters of selection focused not on blaming men for oppression but on recognizing that women have colluded in this oppression. It would be unfair to concentrate on one or two chapters simply because each contributor has a unique perspective to share. Suffice it to say that 14 of the 16 writers are over 45 years old, and many of them have risked their professional futures by standing up for the rights of women to work along side men in professional church work. What makes these stories unique is the fact that the
stories are the content. So rather than reading about women's struggle for equality from the top down, we read about it from the bottom up. Here we discover the leading edge of religious scholarship. The only disappointment was that the stories by Church of England and Catholic writers echo those of our sisters in Canada and America. While the Anglican Church in Canada and Australia have stepped ahead of the English and ordained women, these ordained women still have to cope with protests and blocks. Oddly enough, Catholic women are not pushing for women to be ordained the way many are in North America. In some respects these churches are still tied to their home base in England or Rome and are not yet indigenous. The Uniting Church, native to Australia, was formed in 1977 and has ordained women since its founding. Overall, this book is worth reading for an insight into current Christian struggle for women in Australia and New Zealand. 

Sisters in Spirit is another collection of essays, but by Mormon women about Mormon women. Edited by Maureen Ursenbach Beecher and Lavina Fielding Anderson, these essays are the culmination of monthly breakfast meetings of modern day Mormon women struggling to be faithful and feminist. It begins by establishing the distinctions of Mormonism from mainline Christian churches. Mormon women have suffered dearly. The basic tenet that distinguishes Mormons from Christians is the rejection of the doctrine of original sin (humanity fell out of paradise by disobeying God's commands). Now while this alternative theology implies that no one is technically to blame for human sin, women in Mormonism are saddled with the curse of Eve. Christ redeemed Adam, but Eve's status remains troublesome. This contradiction creates a major problem for contemporary Mormon women who feel the need to reform their temple. They realized that there was merit in the ERA, yet their church publicly condemned it. These essays provide a fascinating ground-breaking study of Mormon history in America. One essay describes women's roles as healers, a vocation that today is controlled exclusively by men. These essays are the kind that can only be written from within. And for that reason the book also has its limitations. I hoped that these women would go one step farther and really challenge the system that oppresses them rather than just naming it. I was also surprised that none of these women saw that they were suffering or could link that suffering with that of Christ.

Martha Long Ice made an extensive study of 17 clergy women from 12 denominations before writing Clergy Women and their Worldviews. She let the women tell stories about their childhood, call to ministry, their work, ethics, theology and worldviews within a sociological construct. Ice recognizes that her small group of the blade. She believes that we have reached a point where we can shape our future by reestablishing partnership cultures.

To establish her case, Ms Eisler draws from several areas that are sociological in nature, utilizes current scientific work in the dynamics of change, and introduces her own terminology and cultural transformation theory. Her work would, indeed, be a grand synthesis if she were consistently rigorous in her treatment of these diverse elements, but she is not. Most of the material is well presented, some is even uplifting, but she falls short of some of her more scholarly goals. 

Her strongest suit is the summary she gives of several key studies in archeology. She presents a convincing case that for several millennia BCE there was "a long period of peace and prosperity when ... all the basic technologies on which civilization is built were developed in societies that were not male dominated, violent, and hierarchic."

Her foci in the archaeological portion of the work are the cities of Hacilar and Catal Huyuk in what is modern day Turkey, areas in central and southern Europe that are referred to as the Old European culture, and excavations of Minoan sites in Crete. These cultures flourished at different times in the period between about 7,000 BCE and 3,000 BCE. They were primarily Neolithic and agrarian societies, although the Minoan culture extended into the Bronze Age. The subjects of these archaeological studies are brought to life as she describes the activities in cities made up of hundreds and in some cases thousands of people working in harmony.

She argues that these cultures "had a well developed religious system that in-