

Is Christianity good for women? A Response to Peter Lineham.

Introduction

In 1927 women connected with the International Missionary Council (IMC) published the first report ever on the condition of women in the world church. The report affirmed the superiority of Christianity for women because “women find in it a religion that compliments them by ignoring them as women. Christ laid down no rules for women as separate from men” (IMC, 1927, 37).¹ Presumably this statement is alluding to the fact that there is no gender bias against women in Christianity. It is an intriguing and ambiguous statement because while most women would applaud that sentiment, they may also wish to be acknowledged as women and not ignored. Nearly eighty years later, in 2006 Dana Robert asserted that world Christianity is in fact a women’s movement “based on the fact that even though men are typically the formal, ordained religious leaders and theologians, women constitute the majority of active participants.”² She goes on to deplore that fact, as in other areas of research, “the same path is being trod... namely to bury women’s participation in a larger narrative, in this case one called ‘world Christianity.’”³ So is Christianity good for women? If women do form the majority in our churches, why is this? Can we simply assume that it is good for women because the women remain there? This response can only begin to ask the questions and explore some of the issues.

Peter concludes his paper by asserting that the “early twenty-first century has seen a sharp reduction in the debate over gender issues.” (pp??) This may be the case, although I am not convinced, but it does not mean that the issues are no longer there. As Robert pertinently asks, “What would the study of Christianity in Africa, Asia and Latin America look like if scholars put women into the centre of their research?”⁴ Or put even more trenchantly by a South African scholar, Puleng LenkaBula

Many scholars who portray a triumphal tone in the shift of gravity to Africa, have a tendency to omit or exclude questions such as: Where and how are power, administration, management or leadership of the neo-

¹ Quoted in D Robert, *Gospel Bearers, Gender Barriers, Missionary Women in the Twentieth Century*, (Maryknoll:Orbis, 2002), 11.

² D Robert, “World Christianity as a Women’s Movement”, *IBMR*, Vol 30, No 4, October, 2006; 180.

³ *ibid.*

⁴ *ibid.*

Pentecostal, charismatic and AICs [African Instituted Churches] located, lived out and what are their impacts on women and the general church and society? This is often overlooked, downplayed or even ignored by scholars who emphasise these developments.⁵

The cry seems to be that once again, women are marginalised or ignored. She also points to the structural and leadership issues that can so easily marginalise, exclude and disempower women.

Women's Invisibility

Peter reminds us of the new gender codes that developed during the Victorian era and of the ideal of women's sphere being in the home. He describes the "rugged masculinist culture" (pp??) that developed in both New Zealand and Australia where women featured only on the margins, if at all. New Zealand historian, Labrum explains why women were invisible

As the story of the European settlement of Aotearoa has been told, gold-diggers, missionaries, pastoralists, soldiers, adventurers and agricultural labourers have been brought into view. It is the men who settle the country and break in the land. Women are viewed only in terms of their relationship to men: 'The pioneers and their wives.' They are mute appendages, unnamed and therefore unidentified.⁶

Women's invisibility in church history is well documented and readily acknowledged. It is as though women have trained a camera lens through the ages of the church and have found the women missing. As Patricia Hill commented, "The women have simply disappeared."⁷ However, it is not that women were absent from church history – women have always been there – but rather that history has been written from a particular standpoint from which women were often excluded. Peter's paper is a good example of trying to make women visible within the church, finding them sometimes in unexpected places and bringing to light and affirming work that has not often been affirmed or acknowledged. Church cleaning, catering and floral arrangements are affirmed as providing a "key role in shaping the framework for sociability." (pp??) However, when they cross over to the more public roles, it seems that tensions

⁵ Puleng LenkaBula, "The Shift of Gravity of the Church to Sub-Saharan Africa: Theologies and Ecclesiological Implications for Women", *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church*, 8:4, Nov 2008; 303.

⁶ Bronwyn Labrum, *Women's History, A Short Guide to Researching and Writing Women's History in New Zealand* (Wellington: Bridget Williams Books, 1993), 9-10.

⁷ Quoted in Janet Crawford, "Church History," in *An A to Z of Feminist Theology*, ed. Lisa Isherwood and Dorothea McEwan (Sheffield: Sheffield University Press, 1996), 27-30.

begin to occur. Observations such as “Women were sometimes allowed to comment on missionary matters since most of the missionaries were women” (pp??), “but when such women [evangelists] attracted male audiences, some questions were asked” (pp??), indicate that women had their place but that there were indeed “rules for women as separate from men.”

Women’s invisibility is still an issue today. Young Lee Hertig tells a story of Korean Bible women in both the 19th and 20th centuries. In a moving article, entitled “Without a Face” she catalogues the work of 19th century Korean Bible women who were effective evangelists and informal leaders. However, she claims that once the church began to become institutionalised, “masculinization of the Korean church took place, and the hard labour of the Bible women remained invisible and faceless. Patriarchal leadership took over and continued to harvest the Bible women’s work with women’s labour credited to male leadership.”⁸ The situation had not improved for Korean Bible women by the 20th century. She cites a distressing example from 1922 where 300 Southern Methodist women *jeondosa* (evangelists) protested about salary inequalities compared with male colleagues, a male-only ordination policy and their low social rank – being referred to as a “rag” – being either single or widowed, these Bible women had a low status in a patriarchal society. According to Hertig, Korean women *jeondosa* today still struggle with discrimination. A similar situation exists in India, where at the Church of South India’s Golden Jubilee in 1997 the total number of women in fulltime pastoral or evangelistic work had declined dramatically over the previous 50 years. Ironically, “Under devolution, Indian women exchanged leadership and support by foreign (American) women for control and maintenance of traditional cultural assumptions by Indian men.”⁹

Invisibility is not the only issue that may prevent women from flourishing in church. Others may be lack of respect for women, power and patriarchy, women’s opinions not being taken seriously and cultural values being followed rather than Christian ones. This may include women’s internalising certain cultural values, believing themselves to be of lesser significance, and this can take on a Christian meaning. This is especially dangerous for women where Christian attitudes of service and self-sacrifice can be taken too far and therefore result in unhealthy oppression of women.

⁸ Young Lee Hertig, “Without a Face” in D Robert (ed) *Gospel Bearers, Gender Barriers*, (Maryknoll:Orbis, 2002), 186.

⁹ Deborah Gaitskell and Wendy Urban-Mead, “Transnational Biblewomen: Asian and African Women in Christian Mission” *Women’s History Review*, 17:4, 2008; 490.

Culture can certainly be a source of oppression and this was readily acknowledged by early missionaries – footbinding of women in China or *sati* in India being obvious examples. However, there are more subtle examples such as tribalism which can deeply embed male power. This is often too sensitive an issue to address openly in the Majority World and is hardly acknowledged in the Western world although the ‘old boys clubs’ are clearly operational in both church and society in UK. This particular form of oppression maintains the invisibility of women in the church and can lead to the exclusion of women from church structures, worship leading and leadership teams. A quick look at the term card of a local church here in Oxford – 59 sermons to be preached over a 3 month period with two preached by women. There seems a very basic imbalance and injustice to this – especially if the majority of the church members are women.

Moreover, we can become blinded by this as the prevailing culture and fail to see and name this oppression as sin. And then, as feminist theologian Serene Jones writes, “we must strain hard to see, given the powerfully destructive ways in which oppression structures our thinking and makes even the most profound forms of brokenness seem normal.”¹⁰ Oppression works like a blinder preventing us from seeing that we are caught in sin. Therefore relations of domination begin to abound; women become disempowered and invisible. A Roman Catholic sister from India told me that “women are like curry leaves. Curry leaves are used in cooking to give a nice flavour and taste. When people eat food they throw the curry leaves away. Like this women are fully used and thrown out.” She grieved over the plight of women in her church– women were used for flavouring and were subsequently discarded as they had served their purpose. Sometimes it is difficult not to become overwhelmed by attitudes and structures that work against women’s flourishing.

If this were the whole story, it would certainly seem that Christianity is not good for women.

Women’s Involvement

And yet it is often women who pave the way for Christianity. Consider this example from the Solomon Islands,

¹⁰ Serene Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology, Cartographies of Grace*, (Augsburg:Fortress, 2000), 109.

I recall my mother, telling us as children how the gospel came to her area through one of our pioneering men, Peter Ambuofa. The women and children were his first converts. This was a cultural intention so that if Peter Ambuofa's God killed the women and children, the men would survive. It was when their superstitious beliefs were proved wrong, that they too became followers.¹¹

In this short episode we see many of the themes that recur again and again when we think about women's involvement in the church and in mission. It was the mother who kept the gospel heritage alive by telling it to her children. So often it is the mothers and grandmothers who keep the faith alive, who tell it and model it to their children, who keep the memories vivid by recounting the old stories to their families. It is the women who are the hub of the family and community, passing on vital information, keeping the valued traditions alive.

It was the women and children who became the first Christians. Did they know the tremendous risk they were taking on behalf of their men? Did they realize that they were endangering their lives – and not just their own lives but the lives of their children also – in converting to this new faith? Whether they knew or not, they were willing to accept this previously unknown faith and they were courageous enough to commit themselves to this new God for the sake of their communities. It was the women who bravely shouldered this responsibility and so it was the women and children who, after surviving commitment to this new faith, brought their men to Christ.

It is a similar story in other parts of the world. Robert cites the example of the first missionaries to Hawaii who were greeted by messengers from a female chief. She became an early convert and sponsor of the new faith. In Africa the first converts were often women also. Adrian Hastings has analysed this and concluded that these first women converts saw the "relative equality in Christianity as providing an escape from patriarchal customs that oppressed women"¹² even though over time the church followed the societal pattern of male domination and women lost that initial freedom. Elizabeth Isichei from Nigeria reminds us that generally, in Africa, women experienced Christianity as empowering. "It gave them a place on which to stand, from which they could bypass or challenge male-dominated sacred worlds. Truth is always complex, however, and sometimes Christianity paved the way for new forms of

¹¹ Interview with Lois Kusulifu, June 2002.

¹² Quoted in Robert, "World Christianity", 184.

marginalization.”¹³ In a fascinating study on two women-led African Instituted Churches (AICs) in Kenya, Philomena Mwaura notes the preponderance of women in these churches, not just as participants but also as pastors. She notes that this is in sharp contrast to the Western mission-founded churches where women were only participants. She goes on to explain that leadership still remains male in the mainline churches while classical AICs draw from traditional African religious structures. Therefore women are attracted to AICs as founders, healers, prophetesses, prayer- leaders and evangelists.¹⁴

Many scholars acknowledge that women have a more holistic approach to life and work and that when women come into a church community they bring their families. Women tend to join churches because they hope to find there female solidarity and support for their families. Robert claims that “women are attracted to new Christian movements because they hold out hope for healing, improved well-being, and reconciliation with others in their communities.”¹⁵ Korean missiologist, Chun Chae Ok, claims that women are vehicles for evangelism for their families and neighbours more than men. However, the kind of work often performed by women – hospitality, visiting, counselling, ministries of compassion and children’s work is sometimes seen as secondary to the primary tasks performed by men. She notes that Christian women’s roles in church and mission have not been recorded nor sufficiently recognised.

Women evangelists, women deacons, mothers and daughters are the ones who most of the time, give their total service for the faith community and its neighbours in visiting, in prayers, in counselling and in a variety of aids. .. Women’s witness with the gospel to the world is carried out in weakness and selflessness.¹⁶

She goes on to talk about women exercising a missiology of emptiness, a missiology of comforting and a missiology of healing – both for humanity as well as for nature. Philomena Mwaura claims that women’s healing roles and holistic

¹³ Quoted in M Adeney, “Do Missions Raise or Lower the Status of Women?”, in D Robert, (ed) *Gospel Bearers, Gender Barriers, Missionary Women in the Twentieth Century*, (Maryknoll:Orbis, 2002), 220.

¹⁴ P Mwaura, “Gendered Appropriation of Mass Media in Kenyan Christianities: A Comparison of Two Women-led African Instituted Churches in Kenya” in O Kalu and A Low (eds) *Interpreting Contemporary Christianity, Global Processes and Local Identities*, (Grand Rapids:Eerdmans, 2008), 274-295.

¹⁵ Robert, “World Christianity”, 185.

¹⁶ Chun Chae Ok “Integrity of Mission in the Light of the Gospel: Bearing the Witness of the Spirit: An Asian Perspective” Unpublished paper, 11th conference of the International Association for Mission Studies, Port Dickson, Malaysia, August, 2004.

approach are an extension of their gendered roles on society.¹⁷ These may well be qualities that women are uniquely placed to offer the church.

Women's Separate Space

New Zealand scholar, Eleanor Sanderson writes of her experience with a Mothers Union (MU) group in Tanzania. The MU was founded in England in 1876 by Mary Sumner and now exists in 77 countries with 3.6 million members. It works to support family life and empower women in their communities through supporting the needs of families, tackling the causes of injustice and providing a network to strengthen members in their Christian faith. The MU groups provide a separate space where women can meet together to discuss, express and minister in their faith. "Heart and home of change" is the metaphor they use to speak of hospitality offered, widows and children being cared for, craftwork projects, prayers being offered, joys and sorrows shared, community development embodied. This group of women provide powerful, practical support and sustenance for their community, "the affirmed fellowship of love, the women who support you to leave an abusive husband and work to provide you with a house of your own, the receipt of needed food, the new family after losing your own."¹⁸ Here is a group of women finding huge empowerment and support through their life together. A similar story is told in the Roman Catholic church among the Maasai in Tanzania. In the last decades of the twentieth century, women poured into the church. It was in the church that they found a sacred space, healing and female solidarity, "an alternative female community beyond the control of Maasai men."¹⁹ And so we can see that reality is complex. Church structures can be oppressive for women, alienating, marginalising and disempowering them. Women may have a variety of responses to this. Some will leave hurt and alienated by the church. Others will choose to remain in the church and try to subvert the structures through female solidarity. However, in some contexts women join the church because it is better than the prevailing mores in their societies.

Robert suggests three reasons why women participate in church. Firstly, women join churches because there they find female solidarity and support for their roles

¹⁷ P Mwaura, "Gendered Appropriation of Mass Media in Kenyan Christianities: A Comparison of Two Women-led African Instituted Churches in Kenya" in O Kalu and A Low (eds) *Interpreting Contemporary Christianity, Global Processes and Local Identities*, (Grand Rapids:Eerdmans, 2008), 294.

¹⁸ E. Sanderson "Women changing: Relating spirituality and development through the wisdom of Mothers' Union members in Tanzania" *Women's Studies Journal*, Vol. 20, No.2, 2006; 95.

¹⁹ Robert, "World Christianity", 185.

in the family and community. Often, this support is vital for women who may be struggling to negotiate their way in a patriarchal society. For many women this community that they find with other women in church may be more important than challenging unjust patriarchal structure within their churches.

Secondly women are attracted to the church because it offers hope for healing, improved well-being and the possibility of reconciliation in broken lives and communities. Where women experience brokenness in so many ways – whether it is increasing family breakdown in the West, rape as an instrument of war to terrorise and humiliate women and whole communities,²⁰ or the daily grind of facing gender discrimination or racist structures in the workplace, churches can offer healing and grace to broken and scarred women.²¹ Serene Jones describes the experience of her Tuesday night women's group undertaking a study of sin in Lent. She outlines the various forms of sin that these women were experiencing both within church and society and how they found understanding, solidarity and a certain amount of healing in sharing these together in their women's Bible study group.

Thirdly, women's groups within churches can provide contexts for women to exercise their gifts in ways that may not be possible in society as we saw with the example from the MU. "The MU groups are an autonomous space for Christian women to discern, express, teach and minister in their faith. This is particularly significant given that in their immediate church context there have not been, nor are there currently female ordained ministers."²² So this may mean discipleship training or opportunities for leadership. And although this can take generations, Robert reminds us that in "the twentieth century, Christian women became the first medical doctors, college presidents, social workers, community organisers, and politicians in many countries of the non-Western world."²³

Conclusion

Is Christianity good for women? Recently I attended a meeting of about 40 Anglican women theological educators from all around the world. Every single one of them, without exception, said that they felt excluded in some way from their church context. This has to be taken seriously. We have seen that churches

²⁰ For example, see http://www.amnesty.org.uk/actions_details.asp?ActionID=534 which relates the story of Justine Bihamba working to protect women from rape in the Congo.

²¹ See Jones, "Sin: Grace Denied" in *Feminist Theory*, 94-125.

²² Sanderson, "Women Changing", 84.

²³ Robert, "World Christianity", 185.

can offer safe spaces, places of healing and reconciliation, places of female solidarity. However, as Isichei reminded us, “sometimes Christianity paved the way for new forms of marginalization” so that women can feel excluded, marginalised and invisible. At the turn of the millennium, Robert wrote, ‘As I have gone around interviewing women mission activists in conservative churches, I have heard the same sad refrain: there is less room for women’s mission today than there was twenty or thirty years ago.’²⁴ She continues that stories of gender bias and dismissal of women’s gifts would ‘break your heart.’ Sometimes women collude in this. We know that we do not speak out about injustice, that we are marginalised or silenced in various ways, that we are slow to offer our gifts and insights for fear of rejection. Strangely we collude in our oppression. A feminist analysis of sin tells us that women need to be challenged to hear different things from men. Traditional models of sin assume an audience of men who are socialised into autonomy and power. Women’s sin may be better described as the “sin of hiding.” Susan Nelson Dunfee suggests that, “by encouraging woman to confess the wrong sin, and by failing to judge her in her actual sin, Christianity has both added to woman’s guilt and failed to call her into her full humanity.”²⁵ This is not to say that women are not guilty of pride and self-assertion common to all humanity but rather our strong ethic of care-giving and nurture can lead us to keep the peace at any price. In this way Christianity has not helped women to flourish but has rather added to our burden of struggling with our role and place in church.

And yet many women around the world (not all) remain in church.²⁶ We know that Jesus is good for us. Dorothy Sayers wrote in her essay, “The Human-Not-Quite-Human” that “it is no wonder that the women were first at the Cradle and last at the Cross. They had never known a man like this Man – there never has been such another.”²⁷ Jesus took women seriously and always treated women with dignity and respect in the Gospels. He discussed theology with women (the Samaritan woman at the well), he liberated women from bondage (the woman with the issue of blood), he challenged gender bias (the woman caught in adultery), the first people he entrusted himself to after the resurrection were women, he had women among his disciples and was financially supported by

²⁴ Dana Robert, ‘Women and Missions: Historical Themes and Current Realities’, in *Twentieth Century Missions and Gender Conference* (Boston University: Unpublished, March, 2000), 12.

²⁵ Dunfee in C. L. Hess, (ed) 1996, ‘Education is an Art of Getting Dirty with Dignity’ in C. G. Neuger, in *The Arts of Ministry: Feminist-Womanist Approaches*, (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 69.

²⁶ For example, see <http://www.spiritedexchanges.org.uk/index.php?id=87>, Christine’s story.

²⁷ D Sayers, *Are Women Human?* (Grand Rapids:Eerdmans, 1971), 68.

them, he selected images and parables to communicate on a deep level with women as much as men.²⁸

To go back to the ambiguous comment from the 1927 IMC report. Women do not want to be ignored as women, but rather affirmed as women and for what women have to offer. Women long to be in a church where there are indeed “no rules for women as separate from men.” However, perhaps we will all be able to answer this question more accurately and comprehensively if we decide to pay more attention to Dana Robert’s plea, “What would the study of Christianity in Africa, Asia and Latin America look like if scholars put women into the centre of their research?”

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²⁸ See Kenneth E Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes - Cultural Studies in the Gospel* (London: SPCK, 2008), 194-5.