

PANEL: WOMEN AND POWER IN THE CHURCH

WOMEN, POWER AND LIBERATION

The theme which binds together my overview on the issues of women, power, and liberation is the search for a more loving and equal Church. The eschatological vision of salvation and freedom gives a radical impetus to this struggle for Christians, for the Church is never identical with the Kingdom even as it is spurred on and influenced by it. Both renewal and the new are always possible.

My paper has two parts with a brief reflection between on the importance of criticism. The first deals with women's position in society and Church, with special attention to the cultural and socio-political structures that hold women in oppression. Women have coined the phrase "the personal is the political"; my emphasis will be on the structural and social framework of the personal and interpersonal dimensions of women's lives. The second part centers on liberation. What is needed and how shall we work for women's liberation? Has this liberation a meaning for human liberation generally? And finally, has the women's movement a specific contribution to make to the methods of working for a fully human liberation?

1. In our society woman is the subordinate sex. Her major role is to help and support man, to care for children and home. All this is not seen as work (or only as a work of love) for she receives no payment for it. This role is anchored in the laws of our society. Man is the main provider but in most states this means the bare necessities are required from him. Money earned over and above is his, and what is given comes from his "graciousness." Many examples could be given here, but one must suffice. More frequent divorce today often means that the woman falls from middle class status to welfare and food stamps. Usually she must support a home and children, in the best of cases, on half of a man's salary. Should she go back to work, she has the double burden of work for wages and work at home, plus the care and nurture of children. By law there is no wage payment for work in the home nor for the care of one's children. Yet a woman who nurtures and provides for foster children receives payment from the state. Her work is counted as part of the Gross National Product; the divorced woman's care for her own children is not part of the GNP.

The growing impoverishment of women in our society tells us something about socio-economic structures. In this country the great majority of those on welfare are women with children. Through divorce or desertion (the divorce of the poor), women are everywhere heads of households caring for several small children. Should they get a job, children must be put in day nurseries, but there are few good, inexpensive facilities available. Even then the jobs for the majority of women are dead-end, pay the minimum wage, and offer no chance of promotion. It is said that most poor women are at the lower end of the job market and the lower end of the welfare sector; the upper end of welfare—social security and unemployment insurance—are considered entitlement programs, but the secondary welfare sector carries a stigma. Help with money or food stamps is considered a privilege (from the state bountiful), not a right. Women

everywhere receive less pay than men, and are segregated into the low-paying jobs marked out for them. Women receive but fifty-nine cents for every dollar men earn.

The socialization of women tells yet more. Women are socialized to be the amiable ones, continually looking to men for approval. As Rousseau said, women are educated to be pleasing to men. And men can always count on finding another woman who will please them if wives are difficult. So women remain quiet, unobtrusive, serving, because in the most cases they are economically dependent. Women are socialized to sacrifice, to be there for others, to ignore their own needs and desires. And this has often been held up as Christian virtue. But self-immolation is not Christian; it has the mark of pagan appeasement of the gods, and makes those who are served selfish and egocentric.

In the Church the structures that subordinate women and make them almost powerless are as strong as in society. Here we can see with clarity the structural sins of sexism. That women cannot be ordained priests means, in effect, that women have no decision-making power in the Roman Catholic Church. It means that the sacraments which nourish Christian life are wholly in the hands of men, giving them a superstitious, magical character. Women are told by the Church that their total vocation is motherhood; they are defined by their biology. Violence against women in marriage is often condoned; wives are beaten both physically and with abusive language or raped in marriage itself. And just as society tends to ignore these aspects of family affairs, so does the Church. Often, in fact, the woman has been encouraged to put up with such violence to keep the family together, or because she is economically dependent on the husband who is asserting his headship and dominance. Until recently, "obedience" was written into the marriage ceremony itself, symbolizing the long churchly tradition of denigration of women as naturally inferior, as temptresses (Eve), or as evil, people who must be kept firmly in place lest they do harm to men.

In sum, these structures of both society and the Church have so long oppressed women that they have been accepted as God-ordained, and are internalized by women themselves. These structures are unjust and evil, even when carried by a long tradition, for they tend to make women powerless. The issue is not simply that some men are dominating and oppressive, but that the very framework of both society and church anchor this oppression and powerlessness.

Patriarchy, the rule of the fathers, is the name of this structural system. It is a framework that has been in place for millenia, the social context into which both Judaism and Christianity were born. It is an adaptable system which worked in a feudal economic system and continues in a new fashion under capitalism. It is important for Christians to see patriarchy as an unjust and sinful system which must be rooted out and supplanted. But this is not an easy task since it has a long history and has shaped a great part of Church tradition. It has anchored itself in Church structures and in theological reflection. We must recognize that religion, including Christianity, can be bad as well as good. As Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza writes: "Tradition is a source not only of truth but of untruth, repression, and domination." To go on developing theology in the present without probing this fundamental wrong is to make a false

peace. Such a critical approach to theology often makes people uneasy; it requires a genuine change of heart, conversion, openness to a new vision.

2. How shall we work for women's liberation? The first task, and one which must continue, is the raising of consciousness for more and more women. Women must claim their own identities and refuse to be defined by others. This is a work of education which often begins with a first insight; an incident or a remark can touch off this awareness (something "clicks") and woman's subordination no longer seems God-ordained. Raising of consciousness cannot stop with insights into personal oppression, however, but must encompass awareness of the societal and ecclesial structures of injustice. Courage is needed to pursue this task, for powerful interests are on the side of patriarchy, as evident in the attack of the present administration on women's issues (e.g., no money for battered wives' centers or nurseries, the cutting of welfare and food stamps, the campaign against ERA). Two points can be stressed here:

- (a) Instead of the counsel of passive endurance, women must be encouraged to become shapers of their own destinies. Such "agency" is real virtue and not "uppityness" or aggressivity. Distrust and suspicion of the values and norms laid out by society for women is in place.
- (b) Women must work to free themselves from unreal loyalties. Adrienne Rich writes of the importance of being "disloyal to civilization"; such disloyalty on the part of women is loyalty to true freedom and human dignity.

The second task is the bonding of women in autonomous groupings. The power of the powerless, when set over against the vested interests of oppression, depends on the powerless finding each other. Isolation destroys, as powerful oppressors have always known. "Divide and conquer" has always been the tactic of despotism—of the rich against the poor, white against black, colonizer against colonized. The qualities that women have developed through history, the so-called feminine values of love, sensitivity, compassion, nurturance, concreteness, relationship, and community are central Christian values ultimately important for the whole human race. Thus Adrienne Rich writes, "the connections between and among women are the most feared, the most problematic, and the most potentially transforming force on the planet." And in the context of the Church, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza urges that "the most pressing issue" is the creation of "a new 'sisterhood' which is not based on sexual stratification," i.e., nun vs. lay woman, or nun vs. mother. "Such a new sisterhood is the *sine qua non* of the movement for ordination within the Roman Catholic community." Otherwise the old scheme of divide and conquer is at work and women are kept separate. It is significant that NAWR (the National Association of Women Religious) has changed its name to NARW (the National Association of Religious Women) to indicate that it is open to all women.

While women need autonomous organizations, even separatist ones at times, links to other groupings—base communities, tenant and community organizations, labor unions, and all the many alternative groupings that are widespread in the U.S. today—are equally important. They connect women to the other movements for a just and free human world. It may well be that the peace movement, as it spreads from Europe to the United States and as its first large convocation takes place here in New York this weekend, will be of special im-

portance for women and for all people in the future, the focal point for a great variety of energies. Women have already begun a Pentagon action both in the eastern and western parts of the U.S. In unity there is strength; coalitions and organization are of immense significance for the future. All will be politically marginal unless ways are found to make alliances with others in the struggle.

Finally, a word on the significance of the women's movement for the wider context. A multitude of women have already had the experience of a living movement in which thousands of women have shared ideas with love. Sheila Rowbotham writes of this as "the source of a most extraordinary power." The networking of women has not only effectively challenged self-subordination and the role of the "friendly helper" but also has challenged the underpinnings of all oppression and exploitation. In this networking, women have learned new ways of organization that emphasize local control and the importance of each person in shared leadership. Women have discouraged forms of leadership that leave some people uninvolved. A new mode of organization is evolving which is a rejection of elitism ("Father knows best"), the undervaluation of the majority of human beings. To put this in the religious terms of Latin American liberation theology, it is the "option for the poor" like that of Jesus, for the outcast, the oppressed, the unimportant people. This option is not merely the compassion of "lady bountiful charity"; it is the option for the inclusive community of human beings across all the false barriers of race, sex, class, culture, and religion. This mode of leadership and organization, while still in its first stages, is a powerful challenge both to society and to a hierarchical-patriarchal Church.

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CONTEMPORARY WOMEN'S SPIRITUALITY: A BREAKTHROUGH OF POWER

Women's Christian spirituality today is the experience of a breakthrough of power. Power is the central experience for three reasons: (1) it is the heart of all spirituality; (2) it is characteristic of Christian spirituality; (3) it is what women, especially, are feeling.

Spirituality is the actualization of the human capacity for self-transcendence. It is the experience of the energy and empowerment to reach out beyond oneself to truth, to loving relationships, to free decisions and commitments. It is to become oneself by deepening one's affectivity, expanding one's horizons, moving to realize one's self-creating values.

Christian spirituality is the actualization of this self-transcending capacity through the self-gift of God, in the risen Jesus, by the empowerment of the Spirit. The Christian experience of God, Jesus, the Spirit, is precisely the experience of power: energizing love, life-giving vision, growth-producing gift of our true embodied self to ourselves flowing from God's presence in the deepest core of our being. It is power experienced not as control or manipulation or