

The Impact of Christ on Female/Male Relationships, October 18, 1990: WOMEN AND SPIRITUAL GROWTH

Introduction

A few years ago, a man phoned me and asked if I had some time for a talk. I replied that I was getting my kids ready for bed, but afterwards would be happy to chat with him.

He phoned an hour or so later, and we had our talk. He had read and kept, as it turned out, a letter to the editor of The Vancouver Sun I had written a few years before concerning a prison riot at Matsqui Institution. He had appreciated some of the points I had made concerning the evil of the prison itself, and now was writing his memoirs. He was planning to quote some of my insights into the nature of prison in light of his own son's experience as a prisoner. On a whim, he looked up the only 'Northey W' listed in the phone book, and asked if I was one and the same.

We had a subsequent lively conversation until in passing, he discovered that I had a Christian commitment. "Not one who really takes the Bible seriously though?", he asked incredulously, then immediately cooled, and soon therefore terminated the conversation, upon my affirmative response.

I presume neither I nor my letter found its way into his memoirs after all.

Bruce Cockburn says that he often qualifies his affirmation of his Christian faith by saying: "But I'm not one of them." He is obviously smarting under the identification of Christianity with things unsavoury said or done in the name of God and Christ.

My confession of faith is: I believe that Jesus Christ is the Central Protagonist in the Story of Human History. That one misses the Essential Plotline of the Cosmos, if Jesus does not occupy the Pivotal Role. That Jesus is the only Hope for a Humanity otherwise hopelessly groping in the darkness, riddled with injustice, addicted to myriad unsatisfying alternate attachments, or oblivious of God's Way in the world.

I also am committed to an approach to the Bible which claims that "There is a stream in the Bible, which carries us on its own to the sea, if only we entrust ourselves to it. The Holy Scripture interprets itself, in spite of all human limitations." (Barth:1973, p. 18). What gives life to Christianity is its dependence upon so-called 'canonical' Scripture as the Word of God, interpreted against the backdrop of the Christian tradition, past and present.

So I approach the topic today as a follower of Jesus who relies primarily upon the Bible read in dialogue with others past and present for clues about how to go about that.

Christ, the Hermeneutical Principle

But this is where I first begin to identify with Cockburn's concern about distancing himself. I was raised in a Christian tradition known as 'Plymouth Brethren'. While the great Reformation rediscovery of the 'priesthood of all believers' was theoretically espoused in my upbringing, that everyone had equal access to God in Christ, in practice it was denied all women who strictly were enjoined to 'keep silent' in all aspects of formal worship (except singing), to wear a head covering as a sign of submission to the patriarchal authority of the male, only to engage in ministries to other women or to children, and to be fully subservient to the father or husband at home.

We presently worship with the Mennonite Brethren, with all that such exclusionary denominational names imply.

My wife and I have fought our own small battles at the local church setting in resistance to such overt dominance of the male over the female.

This androcentric, or man-centred view of women has a long history in the church. One of the most prolific, and entertaining of the church 'fathers' was Tertullian. Listen to one of his classic statements about Eve, prototypical woman:

You are the Devil's gateway. You are the unsealer of that forbidden tree. You are the first deserter of the divine Law. You are she who persuaded him whom the Devil was not valiant enough to attack. You destroyed so easily God's image in man. On account of your desert, that is death, even the Son of God had to die.
(quoted in Ruether: 1974, p. 157)

It was widely held in the understanding of the Church Fathers that man fully represented God's image, whereas woman was only in God's image when included with the male, her 'head'. In this view, procreation becomes the only purpose for the existence of a female, as distinct from a male, body. Hardly a respectful view of a woman! In fact, there were only three basic images of the possibilities for a woman amongst the Church Fathers: woman as whore, woman as wife, and woman as virgin. (Ruether: 1974, p. 163). Of these three, the third was far and away the ideal in western Christianity.

But not only is it so that the early church fathers were 'misogynists' - - 'woman-haters' for the most part, who denied women any other than an ancillary role to the primary 'headship' of the man, but the Bible itself has upon it throughout a 'patriarchal stamp'. This is problematic for sure to any who would both affirm the authority of the Bible for faith and practice, and woman's own bearing of the divine image, with all that implies by way of complementarity in human relationships.

At the turn of the last century Elizabeth Cady Stanton published *The Woman's Bible*, claiming that the Bible is not a 'neutral' book, but a political weapon against woman's struggle for liberation, because the Bible bears the imprint of men who never saw nor talked with God. She insisted that "The Bible is not just interpreted from a male

perspective, as some feminists argued. Rather it is man-made because it is written by men and is the expression of a patriarchal culture... But feminist interpretation particularizes and relativizes the Bible even more by specifying that biblical language is male language and that the cultural conditions and perspectives of the Bible are that of patriarchy.” (Schüssler Fiorenza: 1983, p. 13)

Given that androcentrism (a man-centred mind-set) and patriarchy (a man-centred power system) are, to use Jesus’ imagery, the ‘wineskin’ in which God’s Word comes to us, the setting, if you like, for the jewel of God’s new Way in the world, one can quickly enough give up on the Bible. It seems so hopelessly culture-bound, that it could not possibly bear God’s Word of liberation. That Word must be looked for somewhere else. This in fact is the position taken by many nonchristian feminists, utterly impatient with the long history of judeo-christian patriarchy. It poses of the Bible the age-old question of the Serpent: “Has God said?”

I must confess that I feel very strongly the tug of this objection. It is highly disquieting at times, and not given to ready explanations. I gather that the Nov. 1 talk on “Those ‘Difficult’ Texts” will struggle with some of this. Though most will say it is not just individual texts, but the entire warp and woof of the Bible which is of concern. At best, some will say with this writer, “As the root model of Christian life and community the Bible reflects biblical women’s strength as well as their victimization. Therefore, the Bible is source for women’s religious power as well as for their religious oppression throughout the history of Christianity to the present. A Christian feminist theology of liberation must cease its attempts to rescue the Bible from its feminist critics and assert that the source of our power is also the source of our oppression.” (Schüssler Fiorenza: 1983, p. 35)

In response, I would suggest that much of the problem is one of perspective. If one’s only starting-point is the experience of oppression by women, then the Bible does seem one more contributor to that terrible history. Likewise however, if one’s point of departure is the general experience of evil in this life, one will be tempted to give up on the Bible. For there is not even a hint in the Bible of these profound “Why?” questions being addressed, only posed.

But the Bible challenges us rather to accept another starting- point: one of faith in a God who made us for freedom and communicated to us primarily in the collection of writings which found their way into the Bible. While endless attempts have been made to see the locus - - place - - of God’s revelation in some other realm: the struggle of the oppressed, the struggle of women, some canon within the canon, etc., the witness of the Bible to its own locus of revelation is the canonical Scriptures - - what in the process of time, ended up in our Bibles today. When Jesus said for instance that “The Scripture cannot be broken” he was referring to the patriarchy-encrusted closed canon of the Old Testament, as we have it in our Bibles.

Job discovered this starting-point when he says in dialogue with God:
“You said, ‘Listen now, and I will speak;

I will question you,
and you shall answer me.’ “ (Job 42:4)

In the end, the Bible turns the tables and profoundly questions us, such that we relinquish our role as the Bible’s judge, and permit it rather relentlessly to probe us. For “The word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God’s sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.” (Heb. 4:12 & 13), and, “[One] does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.” (Matt. 4:4)

In our darkness, whether as oppressed or oppressor, we are like the child searching for the lost coin under the street lamp because there is (so we think) more light there, when in fact the coin’s location is elsewhere, in (what seems) a place of darkness. Being powerful or powerless, oppressed or liberated, poor or rich, male or female, does not change the rules of the game. If we are to discover the liberating Word of God for us today, Jesus and the Bible know no other place to look than in the Bible.

I was greatly helped in preparing today’s talk by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza’s masterful book, *In Memory of Her*, noted in the handout I’ll give you. It is a work of immense scholarship, and highly original. But I believe she is forcing God’s revelatory Word into her own preferred place of searching when she says:

I would therefore suggest that the revelatory canon [measure] for theological evaluation of biblical androcentric traditions and their subsequent interpretations cannot be derived from the Bible itself but can only be formulated in and through women’s struggle for liberation from all patriarchal oppression. (Schüssler Fiorenza: 1983, p. 32)

On the contrary, the locus of revelation is the Bible, from all that the Bible and Jesus claim, not anyone’s struggle for freedom: whether the Israelites, slaves, oppressed people, children, women, minorities, etc. That God acts on behalf of those struggling for freedom is the message of the Bible throughout. Shalom is the Bible’s word for salvation, justice, and peace: and is held out on behalf of all struggling against oppression. But it is not the struggle of the oppressed that calls forth the authentic Word of God, and is therefore prior to, then sits in judgment on, the Bible. Rather, it is the Word of God in the Bible which comes at God’s free initiative to offer shalom to all oppressed people.

But there is a central interpretative key to the Bible. And I believe this helps us move away from the horns of the dilemma described above. One against which the entire text must be read: it is Jesus Christ, in his words and deeds, access to which we have through the New Testament. For Jesus, according to the Prologue of John’s Gospel, is the Creator-Word about whom the entire sweep of biblical revelation is concerned. Or, in the opening words of the book of Hebrews (vv 1 & 2):

In the past God spoke to our forefathers [there is that androcentrism] through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he [who is beyond sexual

differentiation and the language it uses] has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe.”

The ‘imitation’ of Christ becomes the central call of the New Testament for every human, so that Christ may ultimately be all, and in all (Col. 3:11) - - the goal in fact of the entire Bible. But as one writer asserts: “There is thus but one realm in which the concept of imitation [of Christ] holds - - but there it holds in every strand of the New Testament literature.... this is at the point of the concrete social meaning of the cross in its relation to enmity and power. Servanthood replaces dominion, forgiveness absorbs hostility. Thus - and only thus - are we bound by New Testament thought to ‘be like Jesus’.” (Yoder: 1972, p. 134, italics mine) I will return to this theme which the writer calls “revolutionary subordination”.

Dale Patrick, an Old Testament scholar, argues that throughout the Bible there is an “unwritten law” to which the written law invariably points, even when at times it seems to contradict this law. He says: “An idea has emerged in this study... that may satisfy those who endeavour to take Scripture seriously but not literally - the idea that the written law is a witness to the unwritten law...” (Patrick: 1985, p. 253) Elsewhere, he says: “It is my contention that Jesus, followed by most New Testament authors, revived the idea that God’s law is an unwritten Law. The epitome of this unwritten Law is the commandment to love God and one’s neighbour, which both fulfills and surpasses the sense of justice and right forming the basis of Old Testament divine law.” (Patrick: 1985, p. 190)

I wish to return to the question of Old Testament law when I consider violence against women. It is enough to say now that the Apostle Paul argued that the ‘curse’ of the law was in fact its sacrificial violence, and that Christ’s death on the cross ‘travestied’ the sacrificial system - - declared it illegitimate, and pointed to a whole different way of human relationships.

I cannot therefore completely agree with Schüssler Fiorenza’s contention that “The ‘advocacy stance’ of liberation theologies cannot accord revelatory authority to any oppressive and destructive biblical text or tradition. Nor did they have any such claim at any point in history. Such a critical measure must be applied to all biblical texts, their historical contexts, and theological interpretations, and not just to the texts on women.” (Schüssler Fiorenza: 1983, p. 33) But I would agree with her subsequent statement that “...such revelation is found in the life and ministry of Jesus ...” (Schüssler Fiorenza: 1983, p. 34), and say with others that this revelation is the key to reading the entire Bible.

The same writer suggests however a “hermeneutics of suspicion” - - an interpretative principle of suspicion - - (Schüssler Fiorenza: 1983, p. 56) in approaching the biblical text. This is too negative. Instead, I would urge a “christological hermeneutics” perhaps best exemplified this century by theologian Karl Barth, though many complain he was too rigid in its application, and he was regrettably too androcentric in his reading of the biblical text.

If I may use a high 'tech' analogy: on my word processor is a 'Find and Replace' function. I can find any text and replace it with any other text. Well, something of the sort happens in the Bible with Jesus: he allows us to find all patriarchal overlays, as he does all violence, all legalism, all oppressiveness, all that runs contrary to the way of self-giving love, in the biblical text, and replace it with the 'gospel of peace' which he came preaching and doing. Seen in this light, that is through the paradigm or model of Jesus, the Bible is revelatory throughout. For Jesus is the ultimate interpretative key who unlocks the latent meaning of the Bible and allows it to carry us to the sea, in spite of all human limitations. But no text is to be suppressed, rather fulfilled in Jesus. In Jesus' own words:

"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. (Matt 5:17 & 18)

To employ a more biblical analogy: we must allow the Bible to "put on the Lord Jesus Christ" like a garment, just as repeatedly Christians are urged to "put on the Lord Jesus Christ", in order for us to hear the Word of God aright.

Jesus and the Community of Equals

Perhaps the foregoing was too long an introduction to the heart of the topic today, "The Impact of Jesus on Female/Male Relationships". It seemed important nonetheless to clear the way for this discussion, since otherwise Christ may be somehow cut off from the rest of the biblical material. Christ does not allow that I am arguing, nor need we. Next week, Jan Porcino will present Jesus as "The First Personist". It would be stealing her thunder to say too much in detail about Jesus' relationship as a man to women. There is an exciting freshness to Jesus' treatment of women which is as subversive of hierarchical and patriarchal structures today as it was then.

I wish to highlight briefly three aspects of Jesus' life and teaching, including some New Testament commentary.

A. Christ and the Powers

Jesus' inaugural statement about his mission was:

"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." (Lk 4:18 & 19.)

After a detailed study of the Bible's understanding of the "principalities and powers" under whose control we live out our days, one author concludes that they are "... the inner or spiritual essence, or gestalt, of an institution or state or system." - - with an invariable bent towards oppressiveness in relation to humanity. (Wink: 1984, p. 104) But Jesus

challenged the powers precisely at the centre of their spirituality as it concretized in societal customs and institutions. And it is said he triumphed over them, in a bid to undo their negative dominance of humans.

One of those concretizations of the powers is patriarchy, which arises out of the fallenness of creation, where the woman's "desire", as the Gen. 3:16 text says, will be towards the man. In other words, the man would from now on tend towards a relationship of domination rather than partnership towards the woman. Patriarchy is one outcome of the rebellion of the powers in creation. It is therefore one of the powers from which Jesus came to set humanity free.

B. Jesus and the 'Fatherhood' of God

The commonest appellation for God on the lips of Jesus is "Father". Even more intimate was his mother tongue expression, Abba meaning 'daddy'. For the Church Fathers and many others, this was one sure indication that the whole patriarchal structure of male dominance was to be perpetuated. Just as the fact that Jesus had twelve male disciples is supposedly an indication that Jesus only approved of male leadership from the beginning. That this was decidedly not the reality of Jesus' treatment of men and women, I will soon show. But Jesus' choice of specific male disciples was doubtless an indication that men in particular needed strong modeling about the new servant role towards men and women Christ called for. Women knew already enough of self-emptying and self-abasement, under patriarchal structures.

Likewise, the very fact that Jesus consistently referred to God as "Father", and disallowed that title to be applied to any other, was a profound challenging of patriarchal fatherhood and all its privileges of male dominance and control. It was utterly subversive of normal patriarchal images of 'fatherhood', so contrary to God's nurturing, liberating, and self-giving heart.

In the words of one feminist scholar, "The monotheistic fatherhood of God, elaborated in the Jesus traditions as the gracious goodness usually associated with a mother, must engender liberation from all patriarchal structures and domination if it is to be rescued from the male projection of patriarchy into heaven. Thus liberation from patriarchal structures is not only explicitly articulated by Jesus but is in fact at the heart of the proclamation of the basilea [kingdom] of God." (Schüssler Fiorenza: 1983, p. 151)

C. Jesus and Women

As indicated, the question of Jesus in relation to women is really Jan Porcino's topic, so I will only say a few words here.

As indicated as well, the choice of only male disciples misses the reality of a great number of women who believed in and/or followed Jesus, including the Samaritan woman to whom alone Jesus revealed that he was the Messiah, and Mary Magdalene,

who literally became the ‘apostle of the apostles’ in that she first proclaimed the Gospel to an incredulous group of male disciples.

i) Jesus affirmed full female personhood, countering any adoration of his mother Mary because of her motherhood, rather because of her commitment to God. Jesus denied the patriarchal definition of a woman as a womb and two breasts, and said contrarily, “Rather, blessed are they that hear the word of God, and keep it.” (Luke 11:28) - - such as his mother.

ii) Jesus engaged in theological discussion with women over against the woman-excluding realities of theological education of the time. Women, according to Jesus, had equal access to God.

Put negatively, nowhere in Jesus is there a hint of male superiority or condescension towards women. On the contrary, the vision of the kingdom of God was a call to wholeness, liberation, and mutuality in all human relationships. It was a ‘feminist’ vision, because it made room for all God’s children in the kingdom. It was an ‘abolitionist’ initiative because it set out to demolish all power structures, institutions, and social customs which denied freedom to people. It was also a movement of deep solidarity with all the disempowered, disenfranchised, oppressed, marginalized people of Jesus’ day. Women, children, and slaves were foremost as a class of ‘poor’ to whom Jesus had good news to preach, a good news that threatened the socio-political power arrangements of his - - and our - - day to the core. In summary: “The woman-identified man, Jesus, called forth a discipleship of equals that still needs to be discovered and realized by women and men today.” (Schüssler Fiorenza: 1983, p. 154)

Paul and Women

I am grateful that Gordon Fee will treat more fully in two weeks the issue of the Apostle Paul and women. But I would like to touch on it in three areas.

A. Neither Male nor Female

For many, the *locus classicus* - - the central place - - of Paul’s understanding of female/male relationships is Galatians 3:28, which reads:

There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

Likewise, the central Pauline text on freedom is found only a few chapters later, when he says:

It is for freedom that Christ has set us free.

Gal. 5:1

This of course is entirely consistent with Jesus’ declaration at the beginning of his ministry: “He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for

the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." (Luke 4:18b), as discussed earlier.

The statement about the eradication of all barriers to freedom based on power-plays and power-structures was likely quoted by Paul from a popular contemporary baptismal confession.

"Gal 3:28 not only advocates the abolition of religious-cultural divisions and of the domination and exploitation wrought by institutional slavery but also of domination based on sexual divisions. It repeats with different categories and words that within the Christian community no structures of dominance can be tolerated.... It proclaims that in the Christian community all distinctions of religion, race, class, nationality, and gender are insignificant." (Schüssler Fiorenza: 1983, p. 213)

Paul of course knew this to be the reality where women are concerned in his own ministry. This is why scattered throughout his letters are indications that many of his co-workers in positions of authority and leadership were women. Some of the works on the bibliography list I will give out thoroughly document and reflect on this.

B. Subordination

Why then, do we find in other letters ascribed to Paul a call for subordination or submission by women to male leadership? In short, why do New Testament documents such as Ephesians, Colossians, and the so-called Pastoral Letters seem so patriarchal?

Some explain this by stating that these letters are not from Paul's hand, and therefore show how quickly the patriarchalizing reaction of early church leadership reinstated male dominance, all in the name of Paul.

I know Gordon Fee will not argue thus, and I feel very uncomfortable with this way out of the dilemma. I am more inclined instead to understand these texts, including another one in I Peter (2:13 - 3:7) in terms of a submission/victor, or a subordination/revolution motif found throughout the New Testament, especially in the example and teaching of Jesus himself. In brief, these texts point to Jesus, who willingly submitted himself to the rebellious powers on the cross, but that was not the end of the story! For Jesus' submission was like that of a disciplined martial artist: it was a move to absorb the evil of the "principalities and powers" ultimately to disarm and triumph over them!

So what appears on first blush as a purely status quo, 'conservative' response to the present ordering of things, upon a second look erupts with all the surprise of a revolution into something entirely the opposite!

"The liberation of the Christian from 'the way things are', which has been brought about by the gospel of Christ, who freely took upon himself the bondages of history in our place, is so thorough and novel as to make evident to the believer that the givenness of his subjection to the enslaving or alienating powers of this world is broken..."

“But precisely because of Christ we shall not impose that shift violently upon the social order....

“The pattern is thus uniformly one of creative transformation.... [Jesus’] motto of revolutionary subordination, of willing servanthood in the place of domination, enables the person in a subordinate position in society to accept and live within that status without resentment, at the same time that it calls upon the person in the superordinate position to forsake or renounce all domineering use of his status.... It is because she knows that in Christ there is no male or female that the Christian wife can freely accept that subordination to her unbelieving husband which is her present lot....” (Yoder: 1972, pp 190 & 191) But this is not the endorsement of patriarchy, rather its very subversion!

In all of these texts appear the specific example and words of Jesus. The admonition is usually to enduo - - Greek for ‘put on’ or ‘clothe oneself with’ - - Jesus Christ. The idea is that we are to be just like Jesus in response to the injustice, the power-play, the domination, the evil, who took the role of the ‘suffering servant’, the way of the cross, in hope! however, with the sure knowledge that the resurrection would definitively overthrow and reverse the existing patterns of dominance and violence.

And Paul tells us in Romans 8 that even the whole creation is similarly submissively exposed to evil in hope of the ultimate reversal:

For the creation was subjected to frustration [to the evil powers of chaos], not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. (19 - 21)

C. Headship

I hope that Gordon Fee will discuss Paul’s concept of headship. Suffice it to say that for Paul, headship was of a nurturing kind, like a mother, or like the self-giving of Jesus, and not remotely like that of a corporate executive whose control is total!

Women and Violence

I would like now to take a few minutes to address a subject of monumental proportions in our society, and present throughout history wherever patriarchy has reigned supreme. That is the endemic violence towards women, children, and any considered less than fully human, or in Christian terms, less than bearing God’s image.

The local news has been filled this week with the actions of male students at UBC. Two years ago, Marc Lepine unleashed his fury against women in an act interpreted by many as simply indicative of the deep misogyny rampant in our culture. Last year, other universities such as Queen’s were in the news because of the violence expressed towards women there.

Statistics indicate that between 35% to 80% of our children are sexually abused, 80% to 90% are emotionally abused, and 50% are physically abused. Sexual harassment at the work place is almost endemic to the job.

Violence itself is in turn endemic to our culture. Literary scholar René Girard has spent 30 years studying violence across a vast historical and literary landscape. He claims throughout his writings that violence grows out of basic “mimetic desire”, what the Ten Commandments call “covetousness”. Violence, Girard claims, is rampant in all cultures at all times and throughout all societal institutions. When it erupts, all people and societies of necessity develop methods of dealing with it, to stave off sheer dissolution of the fabric of society through endless cycles of reciprocal violence. A “scapegoat” is invariably seized upon, who becomes a convenient sacrificial victim to bleed off the fearful violence. Such a person must be powerful enough to evoke some mimetic desire, culpable nonetheless in some way or other, and vulnerable. Women and children fit this bill in all patriarchal cultures, as do other dispossessed persons. The Jews fitted this role perfectly in Nazi Germany, as they have at other times. A “scapegoat mechanism” is set in place, whereby the violence of the person or society is transferred to the scapegoat in some kind of legitimizing fashion. In other words, the more hidden the mechanism is, the better it operates. The moment I know I am beating my kids because I am angry at the boss, the self-righteous legitimizing of that violence begins to dissipate.

According to Girard, all societies have depended upon religion for a ritualizing of this scapegoating mechanism. But only in the Bible has Girard discovered a transcending of it. He says:

I certainly do not believe that the Bible gives us a political recipe for escaping violence and turning the world into a utopia. Rather, the Bible discloses certain truths about violence, which the readers are free to use as they see fit. So it is possible that the Bible can make many people more violent... Religious truth and social usefulness do not necessarily go hand in hand... In the Hebrew Bible, there is clearly a dynamic that moves in the direction of the rehabilitation of the victims, but it is not a cut and dried thing. Rather, it is a process under way, a text in travail... a struggle that advances and retreats. I see the Gospels as *the climactic achievement of the trend, and therefore as the essential text in the cultural upheaval of the modern world*. (Girard, “Discussion”, p. 1440-1, quoted in “Scapegoats, The Bible and Criminal Justice”, Vern Redekop, unpublished, italics mine)

Of Jesus he says more specifically:

Jesus dies to put an end to sacrificial behaviour; he does not die to strengthen closed communities through sacrifice, but to dissolve them through its elimination. When the death of Jesus is presented as sacrifice its real significance is lost... (Girard quoted in Agnew, p. 500, in turn quoted in Redekop, see above)

I find that these insights take my breath away! What Girard is claiming from his wide-ranging anthropological studies is of course what the earliest Christian witnesses proclaimed: “Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29)

- - the sin of patriarchy and all other forms of violence and oppression, personal and social.

In a recent essay influenced by Girard, a New Testament scholar argues that Paul's teaching about the 'curse of the law' in Gal. 3:13 (only a few verses before the "neither... male nor female" expression in verse 28) is that it is precisely its endemic violence and quest for sacrifice that is at issue, and one which is concretized in all systems of oppression, patriarchy included. The writer then says:

"[Paul] saw the law and the sacrificial order as an expression of human violence against God that issued climactically in the murder of God's son [sic], which God dealt with by giving his Son not as a sacrifice for sin but as a victim of the sacrificial delusion in order to uncover its deceit. He saw that this sacred violence is the curse of the law.

"... Revelation is by definition incommensurate with this world; every human institution, including the Christian churches, is sacrificially structured. The only point of contact between God and the world is the Cross, where human rage breaks against the divine patience, and the divine compassion seeps dialectically into the human heart." (Hamerton-Kelly: 1990) - - and one might add, the way of 'revolutionary subordination' is supremely modelled.

Conclusion

I have tried to argue that the Bible is revelatory of an Emancipation Declaration from all forms of oppression, including patriarchy against which backdrop Old and New Testaments are written. Jesus is the central player in this movement, one which promises to sweep all of history to an unimaginable ending of violence and injustice. This is the promise of "kingdom come" and the "new creation".

Once, when I was attempting some elementary electrical wiring at home, my hand felt the surprise tingle of a live wire! I feel a similar 'tingle' again and again as I attempt to follow Jesus, and discern and act out his incredible message of liberation. One Christian writer calls this being 'surprised by joy' and being suddenly overwhelmed by an indescribable yearning.

The Christian invitation is to come, feel the tingle!

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