

CHAPTER THREE

WOMEN AND CHRISTIANITY

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Abstract: Women's issues in society and the Church constitute many multi-dimensional aspects. Those issues have been perceived more broadly over the last century. Within this century, efforts have been made to address the various dimensions. This paper will first examine how these issues have been brought forward in society, what the role of the feminist movement was and what other factors led to this awareness. Moreover, reference will be made to the reasons that paved the way, during the 1970s, for a clear change in the issue of women's participation in cultural production. Questions related to Christianity, churches, feminist theology and the theological research of women will also be explored. Whether or not Christianity and the churches have contributed, and whether they can actually contribute, to the liberation of women will also be examined. Some basic questions will be examined within this framework. What is the position of women in the Church? Could the historical research of ecclesiastical concepts help to understand the place and role of women and gender? What are the necessary presuppositions in our time, in order to approach this topic from an ecclesiastical standpoint? Finally, the question of women's priesthood will also be addressed.

The issues of women in society

Issues related to the position and role of women in society are actually issues of discrimination against women. The usual way of approaching such issues is to research the stereotypes associated with them, which contribute to the maintenance and reproduction of perceptions and practices that were formerly dominant. As is the case with any social problem, it is necessary to be aware of the negative aspects and accept that those are not valid. The procedure for the recognition of these problems started very late in the history of civilization. It was in the late 19th century that the first considerations emerged in Europe and North America. But had it not been for the efforts of modern times, in terms of human liberation from the shackles of traditional society, there could not have been any discussion about women's issues. In common with other

cases, where thinkers have rigorously judged the imperfections of modernity and disregarded the importance of the changes made in relation to traditional society, this happened with the feminist movement. It was especially critical of modernity, reproaching various aspects of it, particularly the point that it had not contributed to the liberation of women.

Yet those reproaches point to the fact that it has not been understood that, without modern conceptions of society and human beings, there could be no change in anything, including the situation of women, and there could be no feminist movement either. For changes to take place in society in general, it was necessary to question its traditional structure and realize that society is not a given thing but something that constantly changes. This means that human beings can intervene and alter existing social situations. In addition, without accepting the release of the individual from his community, and recognizing that every person has value and can act according to his/her free will, it would not be possible to even conceive of any intervention or change. All this shows that the following factors play an important role in making meaningful social change. First, how relationships among people are understood. Secondly, the relationship between people and society. Thirdly, how social roles are formed, whether they are given or shaped according to will or if, more simply, roles are biological or social constructs. These issues require a lengthy process of elaboration. It is not only women who have suffered discrimination but other parts of the population as well. This is why it is necessary to realize that everyone has a right to claim a place in society and it is not justified to have various kinds of discrimination within it. Such issues have claimed our concern in modern times as we are constantly becoming aware of new dimensions.

Initially, therefore, it was necessary to accept that equality applies to all and not just to some people. Secondly, it was vital to show that the dominant language represents a situation full of discrimination against women and is influenced by them. Thirdly, it had to be proven that the past cannot constitute a tool for supporting social change because it contains and reflects the marginalization of women. The cases of some women who, because of their special position in traditional society had more freedom of movement, do not constitute evidence for the role of women in general, since most of them were marginalized. Fourthly, stereotypes ascribed social degradation but, at the same time, contributed to the reproduction of the discrimination regime. Women's research was mainly targeted at these issues and it was acutely expressed. It goes without saying that if one does not present an existing negative situation in

dark colors, one will not be able to succeed in raising awareness about its negativity.

The reversal of this reality required long-term and arduous struggle. Of course, it could be argued that it was only these struggles that brought about the change in perceptions and realities. Other factors, which contributed to the constant change in society and the great rearrangements of the 20th century were those that, together with women's struggles, helped change the broader cultural context. Amongst such factors, one might mention the movement of populations, urbanization, the need for more members of each family to work, the broadening scope of education in combination with the cultivation of critical thinking, the claiming of equal participation in politics, and so on. It might not be wrong for one to argue that it was the combination of all the above that acted as a catalyst in the issues of women. It is important to mention here that when the book *The Second Sex* (1949) was written by Simone de Beauvoir, women's claims were expressed particularly strongly. Of course, in the early post-World War Two period, referring to history or developing arguments regarding the participation of women in the production of culture could not be considered. The situation, though, would start to change later on, as we shall see below.

It should also be noted that the research on language codes initially turned towards an investigation of the language of the Bible. For this reason, a Bible for women (which contained language interventions) appeared quite early. It is unacceptable that basic texts, written during periods of the male dominance that they reflect, remain unchanged. The research was mainly directed towards a disapproval of the patriarchy and sexism that were predominant in traditional society. This situation was not only a problem of the West and the East; there were no differences in these issues between the East and the West. The thorough historical research in the West confirmed the problems women were facing in traditional society. The research of Olwen Hufton has been particularly enlightening but other research projects, belatedly being carried out at present in the East, confirm that there was no difference in women's issues compared to the West. This will also be shown in the discussion of the perceptions of the East, below.

Changes in women's historiography

The decades of the 1970s, and especially the 1980s, brought about a diversification in women's research on the subject of history and culture. What happened, exactly, that caused this change in attitude? What is more,

there appears to have been an elaboration of relevant terminology, and new terms were created regarding the role of gender in history and culture. As is generally the case with history and its recording, the same applies to the case of women's history. Older histories referred to the rulers and their war exploits and ignored the activities of ordinary people. It took a great deal of deliberation, as well as challenging the data, for historiography to start approaching culture as a creation of all people and not just a few. But this change necessitated several centuries being disputed. In the case of women, it was necessary to first challenge the previous situation, to realize that it was demeaning and to make the request for gender equality more widely accepted, at least in theory. Only when it was broadly understood that the request was fair, could the effort for the deconstruction of stereotypes begin, along with the painstaking endeavor of implementing new concepts in practice. That seems, at least theoretically, to be a given fact of the 1970s. This was the main reason for the launch of a different kind of approach, reflected both in the research objectives and the theoretical negotiation that developed from that decade onwards. Of course, we cannot present here a reflection on those issues in detail. We will just mention the basic data and its essential outcomes.

The concept of gender became the centerpiece of research, with a distinction made between biological and social sex. In this case, it is how gender is shaped that really matters. Simone de Beauvoir had already argued that one is not born a woman, but becomes one. One may assume that in this there is a dimension that denies biology, but this is not really the case. At the same time, during the 1960s, there was a broader discussion about the humanization of man, equivalent to the issue of gender. Nobody was claiming that man is not biologically a man, and that he will become one. What was meant was the constitution and the building of man's personality in such a way that captures the essence of human existence. This dimension can be particularly noticeable in human freedom, the refusal of violence and the acceptance of the other. The same applies, initially in a negative way, with respect to women. The particular social role assigned to women did not, in all respects, result from biology but from a set of concepts reproduced through stereotypes and the desire to keep women enclosed inside the home, dealing only with the birth and upbringing of children, and without the rights and opportunities. After questioning its background and history, this kind of thinking about gender positively altered in the sense that women now have the ability and the right to freely shape their role and participate in social, political, economic and cultural life in whatever way they deem most appropriate to themselves. The principle of equality has been accepted as a fact and is

now processed and consolidated. Its consolidation is directed at reversing negative situations and behaviors in the modern world. At the same time, these ideas are spreading to other areas, despite the opposition encountered.

This new situation allows for a change in the field of women's historiography. Previously, the idea of researching the past was rejected, because it could not provide arguments for the liberation of women. But now, the criterion of gender is being used to turn research towards this direction. Historians, who were usually men, omitted many details concerning women and only recorded what could be referred to as the activities of men. The patterns of this thinking are similar to those previously associated with the passage of historiography: from only recording hegemonic activities, to recording the activities of ordinary people as well. Despite the unfavorable situation of women, they were not absent from the production of culture and, these dimensions must now be investigated and recorded. The criterion of gender is, thus, now used in a fresh way. This does not mean that the modern demands of women are put aside and that the past is suddenly considered to be positive for them. The two forms of research can run parallel to one another.

Feminist theology

Broader female research and thought can also be traced in the field of feminist theology, as well as in the research of women theologians. At a very early stage, there was criticism of traditional language that enunciated patriarchal and male-centered structures. The 1960s initially witnessed a continuation of criticism and research, as well as growing concern about the place and role of women, not only in society but also in the Church. The shift that occurred in women's thought and reflection from the 1970s onwards, also appeared in the field of feminist theology and women's theological research. Therefore, the presence of women in the history of the Church is also explored, particularly in terms of the behavior of Jesus towards women, which was different from the one that later gradually appeared in the Church. Typical of this is the conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman, which made his students admire the fact that "he spoke with a woman" (Jn. 4.27). His broader circle of students included women as well, and they were the first to bring the message of the resurrection. It is true that the general attitude of the Church later changed and was adjusted to the requirements of the society of the time. In other words, instead of having the Church influence society, the opposite happened. Nevertheless, many women were involved in the social work that developed in the Church, particularly from the 4th century onwards.

These activities are recorded by female theological research and constitute a very powerful argument. If, at a time when women were degraded in society they participated in the Church, then the responsibility for this issue in modern times is much broader. Now that society has recognized the equality of men and women and makes a serious effort to deconstruct negative situations for women, the Church is no longer justified in maintaining stereotypes and situations that reflect the attitudes of an era that was highly negative for women. In other words, it is not justified to preserve social data that has long been overcome by society itself.

To all this, we must add a very important dimension of women's issues that derives from the theology of liberation. This theology, that developed mainly in Latin America but also in other parts of the world, is more interested in action. In the 1990s, there was an adjustment to a new global cultural context. Women theologians who were dealing, within the frame of this theology, with the problems of the poor, found out that women actually faced many more problems than men, such as violence against them, sexist attacks and female discrimination. They therefore stressed the need to consider those problems in a special way, taking into account not only the dimension of poverty, but also gender, which placed an extra burden on women's shoulders.

Women's Issues and the Tradition of the Church

It is now necessary to briefly look at the status of women in the tradition of the Church and the gradual evolution of relevant perceptions. We will mainly limit ourselves to the tradition of the East. As already been mentioned, Jesus' attitude towards women was radical for the time, in the sense that it surpassed the stereotypes that did not allow women to be involved in any public activity or consider it permissible for men to socialize with them. However, there were still women's activities at that time presented in the Old Testament, as well as in the early Church. It should not be forgotten that, in the New Testament, there is specific mention of the deaconesses Phoebe, Priscilla and Lydia (student of Ap. Paul). This means that women were not only active in the early Church, but they also had a special place.

Yet Paul had certain attitudes and perceptions that can be judged as rather contradictory. More specifically, in *Galatians*, he talks about the equality of man and woman "in Christ" (3:28). By this, it is understood that the early Church could, to a limited extent and only within its communities, talk about new relationships and perceptions. Of course, much later, events led to the general acceptance of this perception without

the conditions set by Paul, with the reference "in Christ". This means that the modern Church ought to recognize this aspect as a fact of our time. Equality is a general perception accepted by modern society, without regarding the conditions set by the Christian community to be necessary for its acceptance.

But while Paul talks in *Galatians* about equality between men and women, even "in Christ", in *I Corinthians* he refers to the hierarchy of men and women and subjugates the latter to the former (*I Corinthians* 11:3-12). He certainly mentions respect and love between men and women, but this cannot refute his basic position, which contradicts what he says in *Galatians*. The best interpretation, based on the present time reality, postulates the acceptance of what is said in *Galatians* as a basic principle, and considers what is said in *I Corinthians* to be an adaptation to cultural conditions of his time. This interpretation should be considered as more appropriate, putting paid to the efforts made on the basis of improbable claims, to prove the position of *I Corinthians* to be correct. It is preferable to approach the understanding and regulation of relations from the perspective of equality and intellectual cultivation of men and women, to help achieve a balance between them. Paul repeats what has been said in *Genesis* and, with those views that were suited to the cultural context of his time, he had a bigger influence than from what he said in *Galatians*.

So, one can see relatively quickly that, in the framework of the Church, there has been concern about what the woman is. Clement of Alexandria mentions that the woman should also be called "human". This means that this idea was challenged. She is called woman because, as has been noted, she was taken out of man. This makes evident the fact that the relative narrative of the Old Testament influenced perceptions. So, while man has a name, woman is simply "wife". Throughout the ecclesiastical tradition, the Old Testament narrative, which actually has a symbolic character, was considered to be historical fact. It is only in modern times that this has been challenged by modern theology, which maintains that the narrative is symbolic and should not be construed as historical fact.

At the beginning of the 4th century, St. Athanasius the Great, speaking disparagingly about the goddesses of the pagan religion, stated that we (meaning Christians) do not take women into account, even for simple advice, while the pagans have turned them into goddesses (Athanasius, *Contra Gentes* 10, PG 25, 21C). This clearly shows how pejoratively women were treated. Only at the end of the 4th century, St. Basil the Great and Gregory of Nyssa claim that women are also created in the image of God (Basilus, *Homilia in I Psalmum*, PG 29, 216D-217A; *Homilia in*

Martyrem Julittam PG 31,241A. Gregor of Nyssa, *De hominis opificio* 16, PG 44, 182 A-C). In contrast, St. John Chrysostom maintains that it is indirectly through man that women acquire this (*Hom. 26,2 in 1 Cor* PG 61,214; *Hom. 2 in Gen* PG 54,589). These are indicative views to show how controversial the perceptions about women were, even among prominent representatives of the Church.

It is not possible to describe here in detail how the relevant perceptions evolved, and so they will be mentioned only briefly. The woman is considered to be the cause of all evil. She can attract men, so her body should be covered and she should not try to beautify herself. This is apparently a negative attitude towards the body and beauty. These perceptions were generally prevalent in the East. These days, they can still be observed in Muslim communities and, in some cases, amongst the working classes that live in the countryside. It is argued, though, that the woman was raised in the face of the Virgin. However, in traditional texts from the 6th century about the Virgin Mary, especially in the homilies on Theotokos which were falsely attributed to St. Gregory of Neocaesarea, there co-exists on the one hand these special honors to the Virgin and, on the other, the devaluation of the other women who are considered to be the cause of all evil. In those texts, one can find the famous saying: "it is through woman that all evil has come to us, but also all good" (Pseudo-Gregory Thaumaturgos, *Annunt 3*, Pg 10,1177A). The second part refers to the Virgin Mary and the first to the woman in general. Of course, it can be easily understood that such views, which strongly influenced the position of women in ecclesiastical tradition, can be neither accepted in our time, nor justified. They should simply remain in the past and be considered valid proof that the past and the tradition cannot be used in order to draw arguments about the position of women in our time. They are nothing but historical data.

According to traditional ecclesiastical and social perceptions, women were thought to only be fit for the home: they had to do the housekeeping and be occupied with the birth and upbringing of children. Young women were especially obliged to serve others and were dependent on their husband's will or, before that, their father's or guardian's. In traditional society, women had very limited opportunities for training and education and, such opportunities were mainly available just for the young women of aristocratic families. But such was the extent of the connection between prevailing social perceptions and Church practices, that society's basic demands for the reproduction of social situations were interwoven into religious rules. In the case of any deviation within the framework of marriage, the woman was punished very severely. For this reason, some

Fathers, Gregory the Theologian and Gregory of Nyssa, stigmatized this practice of discrimination against women. In the West, discussions about whether or not the woman was an accomplished human being continued in later times, until the Middle Ages. The question of whether or not a woman has a soul was also raised. This question is a clear indication of cultural perceptions at the time. Often, young women were sent to monasteries instead of being allowed to have a family. This was mostly to preserve family property. Moreover, the brutal treatment of women and the derogatory treatment of girls was common practice until later periods. This very practice forced St. Cosmas the Aetolian to react and try, by using soteriological arguments, to persuade men to behave better towards their wives. These are some of the characteristic examples of how women were treated in traditional "Christian" society. Additionally, some ecclesiastical texts regarded women as unclean; these perceptions derive from the Jewish tradition. Obviously, these ideas cannot be supported in our time but still, the Orthodox Church avoids discussing this issue and does not cease using these texts in the worship.

The order of deaconesses

Nevertheless, it should be noted here that, traditionally, the fact that women participated in the social work of the Church should be considered real progress. In this context, the institution of deaconesses played an important role. This was an institution that was originally created to provide assistance in the Church, particularly with the practice of adult baptism. The deaconesses assisted in the baptism of women. We will not be concerned here with whether the deaconesses were ordained (*χειροτονία*) or whether they followed another procedure (*χειροθεσία*). The important thing is that there were specific blessings for their participation in this institution and a standard procedure, as in the other ordinations. After the introduction of infant baptism, deaconesses devoted themselves to the social work of the Church. As can be easily understood, the creation of such an institution during a period of severe degradation of women brings a lot more responsibility to the Church in our time, when the role of women in society has clearly improved. The Church can no longer simply prevaricate with arguments from tradition that interpret unilaterally various texts. This, of course, was what forced the Inter-Orthodox Conference of Rhodes (1988) to discuss the necessity to at least restore the institution of deaconesses in the Orthodox Church.

The Church and the social emancipation of women

The Church, influenced by traditional social perceptions about women, understandably did not conduce to liberation in modern times. It may, indeed, be said that even now it supports the traditional views that are contrary to contemporary perceptions about women and their position in society. Referring specifically to the Greek case, the liberation of women from the shackles of traditional society came gradually with the acceptance of certain basic facts: the wider acceptance of views about gender equality and equal participation of women in political and social life; ensuring women's rights to education and teaching; the urbanization of the population; the need for more working members in the modern family; and the principle of freedom in shaping the personality and role of women in society. The most essential of all those, though, was the acceptance that social roles, and therefore the content of gender, are formulated on the basis of freedom and that nothing is pre-defined in such a way that means it cannot be changed. Such perceptions should be admitted by the Church which, particularly in recent decades, speaks of personal freedom as a basic principle. Individual freedom also means freedom for people to shape social roles. These things are considered self-evident in contemporary society and no one can ignore them. The disregard of these views by the Church simply deteriorates its position, as women have already accepted them and claim their realization. This is the reason why there are no roles defined by tradition. Everyone is free to choose how they will shape their personality and role. Any choice is respected. These are all essential presuppositions that must be accepted by the Church.

According to polls, women maintain their relationship with the Church to a greater extent than men. The percentage is almost double compared to men. How can one explain the fact that women maintain their relationship with the Church despite the disparaging attitudes it holds about women? More specifically, how do they perceive blessings about their uncleanness and texts that speak of their subordination to men? Of course, one would be naive to argue that women accept these perceptions. What seems most plausible is to assume that either, quite a few of them do not understand these texts, which are expressed in a language not easily understood by the average woman of our time, or that they choose to ignore these perceptions of the Church because they have separated their social practice from religious traditions and customs. The second explanation seems to be more likely. However, whatever the explanation is, the Church should at some point understand that it cannot continue reproducing traditional

perceptions about women. Since it particularly values life, it cannot connect the cycle of life with perceptions that refer to uncleanness; this is just a natural (bodily) function of women and nothing more than that.

Another key element should be mentioned here. Egalitarian ideas do not have the potential by themselves to change negative attitudes and (especially) abusive, exploitative behavior towards women. To overcome those coordinated and targeted efforts in the social field are absolutely necessary. But whoever wants to denounce these practices should initially take action on the rehabilitation of women in their own field. This particularly applies to the Orthodox Church. It cannot escape our attention that very little has been done in this direction. Apologetic attitudes reflected in the recruitment of several women cannot cover imperfections.

Over the past two decades, women have achieved high levels of participation in education. This, indeed, remains at high levels in terms of religious education in public secondary schools, but also in theological schools at university level. In fact, the percentage of women attending courses in theological schools is very high; life goes on without paying attention to the backward perceptions held by some and, those perceptions cannot stop the progress of society. This development, as usually happens, may help the kind of perceptions held about women in traditional society to fade. But it is not right to use this "forgetfulness" to idealize the past. It is necessary for young men and women to know what existed previously and how, through struggles and laborious efforts, the current situation was reached. Moreover, whatever is painstakingly achieved must be protected against those who always regard former realities as positive, or who try in any way to reproduce silly and unintelligent stereotypes. There are positive and negative aspects to every period. Humans should make an effort to overcome what is negative but also protect what is positive.

The position of women in the Church

Despite the fact that the change in Greece has become obvious, even in the theological space, it is worthy of particular attention that feminist theology and women's research has not developed in the field of theology. What are the reasons for this? It should probably be attributed to the fact that society ensures the free choice and development of women's personalities. Yet, it is still necessary for women to develop a particular vision of society, the Church and theology, based on their own perspectives. Efforts are made for this particular vision to be expressed by people who reproduce traditional apologetic attitudes, and not by progressive people who offer their own elaboration and sensitivity to

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various issues. Of course, the issue of women in the Church should not be addressed separately from the broader issue of the position of the laity. But this is something that the Orthodox Church is trying to circumvent, arguing that such a thing does not exist in its space. The fact, though, that it becomes all the more introverted constitutes proof that a serious issue exists. The truth is that the involvement of women could lead to the development of very useful social projects; the field of social work with the application of modern methods is open. What is needed is the appropriate will and imagination, but such a thing requires the opening of the Orthodox Church and the acceptance of the notion that much can be done, in practice, based on a variety of gifts. And those cannot only be limited to what the clergy can do. In this way, it can be understood that the Church has got many members and it should not be simply identified with the clergy.

Finally, it is necessary to raise this issue of the priesthood of women. This has increasingly concerned Christian Churches in recent decades. There is clear variation in the practices that are followed. The Catholic and the Orthodox Church deny the mere existence of the issue. But the need that leads them to find arguments that respond negatively to this issue constitutes evidence that the problem exists. The Protestant Churches have moved forward and ordained women priests and bishops. This differentiation leads to controversy. In reality there are no strong theological arguments to prevent this practice. The argument "of tradition", that is used by the Orthodox Church, is not enough to prevent the implementation of a different practice in modern times. What was mentioned earlier about the position of women in traditional society clearly show that it was impossible to discuss such issues in the context of tradition. So, how can one expect to get answers from those who never care to ask any questions?

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