

WOMEN AND RELIGION: PROSPECTS FOR LIBERATION

By URSULA KING

RELIGIOUS BELIEFS and practices have been a universal feature of human life.¹ It is not surprising, therefore, that women have always had a place in religious activities, however much the degree of their participation may have varied. Of great importance are the explicit teachings about women which the major religious traditions have propounded. On the one hand, such teachings reflect the position held by women in society at different times in history; on the other, they have contributed to determining such positions by upholding a particular image or ideal of womanhood.

What is the nature of woman? What is her particular role in the family, her position in society at large, her situation in the general scheme of salvation? Has a woman the same possibility and freedom as a man to pursue the highest spiritual goal? All religions have to some extent provided answers to these questions, however inadequate they may be for us today. In the higher religions, we frequently find the great philosophical and theological teachings about the essential sameness of human nature, of the intrinsic worth of all human beings, since everyone, woman just as much as man, is endowed with a soul, a divine spark, and is called to a life in union with God or the Divine. This lofty ideal is often more abstract than real, however; in actual practice, much of the ethical teaching and religious counsels reflect the social position of women in a particular environment. Consequently, we possess many sacred texts which relegate woman's place to a lower or secondary rank to men. Such existing texts are frequently quoted as the scriptural basis for the legitimation of woman's low status through the ages; they are the sacred authority which teaches that woman's status

¹ A different version of this article has appeared in *Social Action*, published by the Indian Social Institute, (New Delhi, 1975), pp 277-91.

has to be low and unequal to that of man. In addition, we have the paradoxical situation where, in some religious teachings, an idealized exaltation of woman in her role as mother and wife occurs; in some instances, an idol of woman in her eternal essence is projected, when in social reality subjugation is woman's common lot.

With an altogether different situation in contemporary society, the religions are faced with a radically new challenge. Following the acceptance of the social, economic and political emancipation of women, new pressures from the social environment act upon all religious traditions. Can any of the religious teachings answer the need for liberation which women experience and pursue in the secular world? The inadequacy of traditional religious teaching regarding the general status and image of woman is fundamentally being questioned today. How do different religions respond to this new and challenging situation? How does christian teaching cope with it? Before commenting on this important question, let us briefly survey the position of women in the history of religions.

Women and the history of religions

It has been rightly pointed out that the various attempts to write a comprehensive history of women through the ages and variety of cultures have all proved to be failures. The conditions of life and local traditions have been too disparate, the gaps in our historical knowledge are too great. Any attempt to write a continuous history of women, including their role in primitive cultures, ancient civilizations and modern societies, has to be abandoned. All one can aim for is an investigation limited to a certain time and space.² This observation applies equally well to the relationship of women and religion. We can never hope to possess a complete picture of the situation through the ages and varieties of religious teachings and practices. No uniform development can be traced through the general history of religions, nor through the history of one particular religion, as great discrepancies have occurred at different times.

It may be stimulating, however, to reflect upon a few random data.³ Women have not always and everywhere been excluded from religious rites and relegated to an inferior status. Certain writers have, in fact, upheld that early matriarchy and mother-

² Cf the entry 'Women, Status of', in *Encyclopaedia Britannica (Macropaedia)*, vol 19, pp 906-916.

³ Cf the section 'Die Frau', in F. Heiler, *Erscheinungsformen und Wesen der Religion* (Stuttgart, 1961), pp 411-426.

right preceded patriarchy and male dominance in the development of human societies. However this may be, there is no doubt that the status of women in early agricultural societies was relatively high. Women were not only creators of life, providers of food and helpmates of men, they were also the supreme symbols of fertility itself. Thus, we find a widespread worship of the *mother-goddess* in the form of many powerful deities in the civilizations of Babylonia, Egypt, Phrygia and Phoenicia, from where it spread to Greece and Rome, paradoxically coexisting there with a legal position of women's complete subordination to the authority of either father or husband. We also know of the presence of the mother-goddess in the Indus-Valley civilization; and the motherly, rather than the fatherly, aspect of God is still a particularly important feature of Indian religious life today.

A survey of the history of religions leads to the conclusion that in earlier times, when religious practices were less formally organized and religious roles less institutionalized, it was easier for individual women to hold a position of religious authority. With the gradual development of the higher religions, a more definite institutionalization of religious roles occurred. Sacred authority, like secular authority, rested with men, and the exercise of religious functions, be it sacrifice, teaching, preaching, blessing or initiation, became a male prerogative. We can observe such developments as much in ancient Mithraism and Brahmanism as in Christianity and Islam. Thus, we are faced with a certain regression in the participation of women in religious life. This is not to say that in the area of religion women once held a position above men. It only means that, in an earlier, more undifferentiated state of development, certain areas of religious activity were open to women which later became closed.

This regression can be found in many religious traditions, and it seems to apply in two ways. First, there is the general decline of the oracular, prophetic and even priestly activity of women, if one compares the situation in ancient cultures with that of more recent times. Then there is the specific regression of female religious activity in particular religions, if one compares the creative time of the founder with later practices. At the time of a new religious breakthrough, when a charismatic personality, an enlightened being, shapes a new way of life, much is questioned and little taken for granted. In contemporary language, one might almost say, seeds of liberation are sown. In such a period of flux, women, in their support of a new movement of reform or radical renewal, were

often allowed greater freedom than was customary in their environment. Only later, when the newly emerged religion had become established and codified, were women's roles once again consigned to what they had previously been in that particular social milieu.

It is, in itself, a remarkable phenomenon that we do not know of any woman who was a great religious founder. Moses, Mahavira, Buddha, Jesus, Mohammad, all are men. However, this is not as extraordinary as it appears at first; the great statesmen, philosophers, writers and scientists of the past have almost invariably been men, too. Public life was, by and large, notwithstanding a few exceptions of remarkable women in history, the sphere of men. Woman's realm was not public but private life: home and family, the preparation of food and clothes, the birth and nurture of children. If one considers for a moment how much time and energy these activities required in traditional societies, and keeps in mind the much shorter average span of life, it is not at all surprising that there was neither surplus leisure nor surplus energy available to women to achieve more. Only the changing patterns of life in very recent times have opened up new areas of freedom: only today has the liberation from traditional chores and dependent roles become a genuine possibility, allowing women to be persons in their own right.

If one looks at the women associated with the figure of a particular religious founder, or with a particularly creative period in the history of a religious tradition, one can see that women were always present, and often more actively involved with religious activities than was possible later. One has only to think of some of the outstanding women in the Old Testament, their active and sometimes crucial role in the early history of the Israelites. This contrasts sharply, for example, with the passive role of women in later Jewish synagogues. Even today, only the reformed synagogues allow women active participation in their service; for the first time in history, they have just begun to train women as rabbis.

A similar regressive development from earlier to more recent times can be observed in Islam. Mohammad's spouse played a decisive role in early Islam; the prophet's daughter, Fatima, occupies an eminent position for Shia Muslims. Yet women's activities in Islam are generally restricted to the private sphere. The use of the mosque on Friday is denied to them. Women may read the Koran but not preach it. Perhaps among the Sufis alone the distinction between male and female tends to disappear; thus, a woman

can reach the highest ranks in the hierarchy of muslim saints. This greater equality of status may well be due to the fact that the mystic path, perhaps more than any other religious orientation, strives to realize the lofty teaching about the divine in all human beings on a practical level.

In early christianity, too, we find an important contribution of women. Their activities are associated with preaching, teaching, social work and even liturgical service. Yet later, many of these activities became impossible through a retrograde development, often linked to a strong emphasis on male asceticism. Such a pattern of retrogression can also be shown in the development of Hinduism. Indian women once enjoyed considerable freedom and privileges in the spheres of family, religion and public life; yet over the centuries, their situation changed adversely. In the vedic age, when asceticism was far less prominent than subsequently, women played a more active role and participated in religious ritual. Later, when the ascetic *sannyasa* ideal became very dominant, the status of women deteriorated.

It would be quite inadmissible to explain the status of women in a particular society as being exclusively due to the dominant religious views held by that society. The image of woman in a religious tradition is an important variable affecting the status of women, especially in a religiously oriented culture; yet it is not the only variable. Religious teachings and attitudes to women are also closely related to the dominant groups and *mores* of a given society. Often enough, religious teaching underwrites the *status quo*, but in certain cases it may also contain the anticipatory capacity for a change of state. In secular society, such a change of state is already occurring in the position of women; in the last fifty years or so, it has changed almost beyond recognition. This situation is so radically new in human history that many leaders of the international women's liberation movement are convinced of the need for a complete break from all religious teaching. Critical and constructive thinking on the contemporary situation of women is so little developed in religious literature that even deeply committed christian women have to look to secular models for their analysis of womanhood. Traditional attitudes towards women die hard and, sad though it may be, they are frequently enough both sanctioned and further reinforced by christian leaders. In order to understand this, it may be helpful to survey the treatment of women in the christian tradition.

Woman and christianity

The historical and theological background of the christian image of woman has been most comprehensively studied in the recent book *Woman in Christian Tradition*,⁴ and it seems best to summarize some of its main arguments. This book provides a much-needed balance to contemporary studies on women which often are too exclusively focused on present problems, without examining in depth their roots in the past.

Two quite different images of the nature and status of women can already be inferred from the two diverse accounts of creation in the Old Testament. These two divergent traditions can be followed right through biblical literature. Social conditions assigned an inferior position to women, but Jesus's own behaviour towards women did not follow the traditional jewish reserve; the concept of womanhood in the early Church was at variance with the mainstream of the rabbinic tradition.

The ambiguity of the status of women comes out most strongly in pauline writings. Firstly, there are those texts which clearly express the subordination of women. For centuries, Paul's teaching that woman is the glory of man (1 Cor 11, 7), and that women are not allowed to speak in church (1 Cor 14, 34), was taken as the scriptural justification of woman's subjugation to man, and cut short any liturgical activity of women in christian churches.

Then there are other texts which express the principle of equality or identity operating through christian baptism: all christians, whether male or female, slave or free, enjoy the same freedom, based on their identity in Christ (cf Gal 3, 23-28). In him, christian men and women are raised beyond the distinction of the sexes. A new spiritual freedom was experienced which led to much heavenly daring and experiment in the early Church, and to a flouting of conventions. Yet at the same time, people remained subject to the law of the flesh which made them male and female. Accordingly,

Paul's injunctions to his communities waver between a vision of heavenly identity of male and female . . . and the earthly reality of sexual life. Indeed . . . much of the difficulties that troubled the Church at Corinth stemmed from the inherent dilemma of belonging to two worlds. Some of the Corinthians attempted to translate their eschatological freedom into their everyday experience.⁵

⁴ G. Tavard, *Woman in Christian Tradition* (Notre Dame Press, Indiana, 1973).

⁵ *Ibid.*, p 32.

This striving for an acting out of spiritual freedom found in baptism, and for a realization of the kingdom of God on earth in tension with the given social environment, characterizes much of the history of early Christianity. In principle, there was the equality of women with men found through baptism; in practice, however, the living out of this spiritual freedom could only be realized through strong asceticism and lived by an ascetic elite. Logically, the spiritual freedom given to woman in baptism should have been followed by her complete emancipation in the world. This consequence, however, is only coming into full force today.

Historically, the freedom of venture and new experiment were soon curtailed when the immediacy of the coming of the kingdom of God receded into the background as only a remote possibility. Christians became settled; the Church had to accommodate itself to the world at large. Injunctions for the behaviour and status of women were modelled on the example of the hellenistic and roman environment; women were assigned to their customary subordinate position. Liberation, found in the New Testament through the experience of baptism, was now only possible through the strictest asceticism, a path theoretically open to both men and women. However, many ascetic writings also provide us with strong anti-feminist teachings. The view of woman as an embodiment of evil and, at the root of all, especially of sexual evil, gained strong support. Woman was seen as a creature of imperfection and congenital weakness.

It would take too long to mention here the many christian writers who, through the ages, gave vent to their anti-feminist feelings. One reason for this is that the ideals of asceticism, contemplation and monastic life became closely associated with virginity. This is by no means always the case in other religions; suffice it to mention the married Sufis in Islam and the married monks in certain forms of Buddhism. In Christianity, virginity was rated higher than married life. There is no doubt that, apart from the biblical sources, neo-platonic thought with its contempt for the body had a strong influence on these developments.

Equally important is it to remember that only relatively late in the early history of christian thought did marriage come to be considered a sacrament. In the first centuries, marriage was mainly a family and civic affair. The ordinary christian woman had the status assigned to her by society. Only the consecrated virgin could claim equality with men as a member of an ascetic elite; for 'the

life of virginity was a prophetic anticipation of restored incorruptibility, a manifestation of the fulness of deification, of the final integrity of the image of God in man and in woman'.⁶

Both western and eastern christianity promoted the life of consecrated virginity. Yet the western Church tended to separate, much more than was ever the case in the East, the liturgical service of the Lord from contact with women. In the West, the marriage of priests was abolished by the decision of a Council in the twelfth century. Instead of the custom dying out, however, we find much clerical concubinage in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries when the desire of priests to marry reappeared. The protestant churches of the Reformation all allowed their ministers to marry, whilst the Council of Trent reiterated the prohibition of clerical marriage in the catholic Church, this time with a great deal of success. This decision is being questioned once again in our own day.

Tavard points out the important relationship which obtains between women and those who build theological systems. In the West, theology has always been the special concern of a section of the clergy; thus, the history of both asceticism and celibacy has its bearing on the image and status of woman. He states emphatically that 'the separation between priests and women is bound to entail a one-sided theology of womanhood, to which woman remains alien and from which she is likely to find herself alienated'.⁷

The double typology of womanhood – subordination or equality – is reflected in many contemporary christian writings, both catholic and protestant. Referring to various catholic models of womanhood, Tavard perceives as their central problem the open schizophrenia they imply. There is the presence of

contradictory streams of thought to see woman as weak and as symbol of temptation, and to idealize her as a symbol of transcendent goodness . . . Encomiums of the feminine ideal and praises of the Virgin Mary notwithstanding, the position of woman reflects the idea of her debility rather than any other of the elements of the total catholic tradition . . . Thus it happens that catholics who wish to promote the rights of women today confront us with the humanistic tradition of Simone de Beauvoir, with freudian reconstructions or, at a lower level of sophistication, with statistical data on women in and out of wedlock.⁸

⁶ *Ibid.*, p 87.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p 119.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p 149.

The conclusion to be drawn from a survey of the christian tradition is that there exists no fully adequate christian model of woman which would meet modern woman's requirements – and this can be said of the traditional image of woman in all religious traditions. Nor is there any model which would adequately express the spiritual freedom of the central christian message. The christian theological stance concerning woman, her function in society, and her place in the Church, was originally dominated by jewish, greek, and roman patterns of thought and behaviour into which the christian revelation

wedged an element of newness, of fermentation, perhaps we may even say of revolution. Yet this element could only take shape in the context of the prevailing cultural forms which to a great extent contradicted it. And so forms of thought or behaviour essentially alien to the christian message have carried through the centuries the seeds of transformation which this message entailed. As I see it, the task of a theological reflection on womanhood lies here: we should disentangle the inner message and its containers.⁹

To achieve this disentanglement, to develop a comprehensive theological anthropology for both women and men, one also needs to plead for competent women theologians who can participate in this task. Who else can adequately express the self-understanding of women and create a richer, more balanced image of woman, if not women themselves? Under different social and economic conditions, women today have come to claim a new position in society; they have acquired a new status of equality. Any out-dated image which may still regard them, due to the one-sided idealization or denigration on the part of men, as either semi-divine or sub-human, cannot answer the needs of a new situation where women claim and fight to be persons in their own right.

At present, no religion can offer a fully adequate model for contemporary women's self-understanding. The newness of the situation has to be matched by a corresponding new creative effort on the part of religious leaders and thinkers, male and female alike. Otherwise women, the most faithful devotees and upholders of religious tradition through the centuries, may well have to abandon religion itself as being an instrument of their subjection.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p 188.

Prospects for liberation

Religion itself is undergoing a crisis in the contemporary world. So far, none of the living faiths has been able to offer an adequate spirituality for the needs of men and women today, in spite of the fact that many religions possess excellent counsels and inspiring models of holiness. Under these conditions, what are the possibilities for a theological elaboration of the image of woman which would offer a genuine prospect for liberation, for outer and inner freedom?

In answer to this question, our discussion may conclude by reflecting on three points which have emerged so far: the existence of regressive trends in the participation of women in religious life; the question of asceticism and spirituality; and the need for a more fully developed theological anthropology.

Even when the position of women at an earlier period in the development of religions can be seen as a relatively better one, this hardly provides us with an adequate model for the contemporary situation. The present may offer us, however, the possibility of a new break-through by liberating us from past fetters, in religion as elsewhere. It may provide a period of new origins, so to speak, where traditional ideas are being recast and where, correspondingly, women have a tremendous task in the working out of new religious possibilities. During a period of religious crisis and renewal, the time has come now to realize in more concrete terms the basic religious teaching about the essential equality of all human beings.

Wherever the ascetic ideal has been too prominent in religion, women have been denigrated. In the past, the counsels of ascetic spirituality have been largely addressed to men alone, to the exclusion of and in detriment to women. What about women's own spirituality? Women's views have rarely been heard or asked for in religion: woman's 'nature', so well projected by men, needed little on its own account. Too often the faults of men have been blamed on women. The ascetic ideal, with its nefarious influence on the status of women, needs to be replaced by a richer and more balanced spiritual ideal which both men and women can share.

If we look at the supreme christian model, Christ himself, we do not find such ascetic tendencies, but a life lived to the full for and among men: a life meant to be a model not for the few but for all. However, a re-judaization of the christian message occurred soon enough, stressing ascetic tendencies. Here again, we have to disentangle the essential message of freedom found in the gospel from the cultural setting in which it occurred.

If religion's deepest aspect is an inner search for the highest freedom found in God, then women must have the same possibility as men for pursuing such spiritual freedom, which is the basis of all liberation in the truest sense. One can say that, in principle, women have had this possibility in the past, as may be seen from the example of women mystics and saints. Yet did the socially inferior position of women through the ages really permit them to conceive of such a lofty vision? Mostly not. Such inner freedom was not an alternative possibility open to most women; rather, it remained a far-away, unreal ideal. Women were always too much submerged in what the indian thinker Sri Aurobindo calls the physical and vital levels of existence. Bound to the propagation and sustenance of human life, women were hardly free to pursue a spiritual calling. Only rare individuals could achieve such a path under extraordinarily fortunate circumstances. Today, however, under different social and cultural conditions, the life of the spirit may be a more genuine possibility and even a necessity for far more people, including women. Of great importance here, together with a search for new forms of spirituality, is the change in the understanding of mysticism as the centre and core of religious life.

Tavard's book, more than any other, spells out what such radical liberation means in terms of the christian message. His outlines of a theological anthropology may provide a fruitful basis for further reflection. If one thinks out in full the christian teaching that the image of God lies in the spiritual nature of man, then neither man nor woman alone represent this image. The image of God cannot be a solipsist endowment of each human being by himself; it lies, on the contrary, in inter-relationships: of man and woman together, and ultimately in the inter-relatedness of a human being with others, regardless of whether they are men or women. Thus the image of God is understood in dynamic terms. It is not a static, essentialist image which is always there; it is rather something which becomes slowly transparent in the inter-relationships of human beings. This means that men and women not simply *are*, but they are always *becoming*, realizing ever more fully the potential of becoming the image of God.

On this basis, a programme for radical liberation can be found:

The baptized woman enters a realm of freedom in which she is, in principle, freer than any other woman.

Christianity implies the total emancipation of woman, the complete removal of the inferiority in which society has kept her.

The establishment of relationships requires at least two terms. Hence man and woman, the male and the female sex. Yet at all levels but the strictly sexual one, the roles of both may be interchanged. There is no dominant and no subservient half, no leader and no led, no superior and no inferior, no intellectual and active and no sensitive and passive, no reasoning and no intuitive section of mankind. Each person can be both . . .

The advent of woman to total social equality with man spells the doom of all previous types of civilization.¹⁰

This offers a truly exciting prospect for liberation, if only women dare to live up to this vision and make it come true. Thus, radical liberation ultimately implies the overcoming of opposite positions: the deep inner freedom to part with an outdated past, but also the freedom of possible refusal to share in some of the more questionable liberties (and new bonds) gained by women in the secular world.

The true ground of liberation is a deep inner, spiritual freedom, so far as this can ever be fully gained by a contingent human being. It frees from the fetters of old modes of thought and life without attaching us to new ones. Thus, the prospect for liberation is ultimately grounded in an underlying spirituality. It restates the question of freedom at the level of spiritual life: if and when life is focused on inter-personal relationships, both human and divine, how spiritually free will woman remain through the bonds into which she enters freely? With all her newly gained and exciting prospects of freedom, will woman ultimately be able 'to share her life constantly with others and still preserve the core of interior silence in which alone she can experience God's presence?'¹¹

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp 211, 194, 206, 224.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p 208.