

# GENDER ISSUES

By DIANE COLLIER

*There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.<sup>1</sup>*

**T**HEOLOGY, WHICH SEEKS TO ARTICULATE an understanding of the nature of God and God's relationship with the created world, has been as male-centred as the pavilion at Lord's.<sup>2</sup> However, the development of feminist theology over the last twenty years has positioned gender at the forefront of the academic debate. Men as well as women are beginning to recognize the significance of gender as a primary social construct which influences how we perceive ourselves both individually and in relation to others.

This article examines the issues that are raised when we use a gendered perspective in an analysis of teenage spirituality. In order to do this I draw upon my own research which has included the interviewing of churchgoing teenage girls about their faith and present one of these interviews as a case study. Although my own research is concerned with the *Christian* influences on the development of self-identity, the issues which are sketched out here are likely to be equally pertinent in any faith context.

## *Gender, faith and adolescence: some theoretical difficulties*

If in Christ there is neither male nor female, can it be argued that the Christian faith is above gender issues? As it has recently been shown within the Church in debates about women's ministry and lesbian and gay issues, attitudes to gender issues cannot be ignored simply because they are complex and troublesome. The Church is a significant cultural force in forming attitudes, self-understanding and expectations of young men and women. Since this is so, in order fully to understand faith and spirituality in all its facets, the perspective of gender needs to be taken into account. As Elaine Graham remarks, gender is fundamental to the experience of becoming an inculturated being, and we cannot deny its impact upon the structuring of our subjectivity, relationships, life-chances and practices.<sup>3</sup>

In essence, gender constructions within Christianity originate in a concept of complementarity believed to be revealed in the creation myths of Genesis. In them both men and woman are created in God's

image, the creation of this image being inextricably linked with the process of human procreation. However, at the Fall childbearing is deemed a punishment. Consequently the woman was considered to be in a position of subordination to the man, condemned by childbearing and its associated female sexuality. This Christian model of sexual identity and its essentialist position, which deems a person's femaleness or maleness to be an unchanging and 'natural' situation, has been extremely influential in Christian thinking and attitudes.

A person's experience of maleness/masculinity or femaleness/femininity may inform, to a greater or lesser extent, their belief patterns, moral codes or patterns of worship. In adolescence, where the physical, emotional and social changes tend to arrive at an alarming rate, the experiences of becoming an adult, gendered individual can have far-reaching implications for personal self-development. For some, this transitional period is a smooth and uncomplicated process, but others are not so fortunate. One woman recalls her teenage years in a Christian context: 'In adolescence the pain of living is very intense. There is no compromise when you are a teenager. Crises come thick and fast, and all situations appear to be of life and death.'<sup>4</sup>

Given the premise that gender is a social construct, how can a gendered analysis and perspective inform our understanding of teenage spirituality? Unfortunately, the answer to this particular question remains largely unanswered. Whilst feminist theology has made great strides in the critique and reconstruction of texts and doctrines, there is a paucity of research in the area of gender, faith and adolescence which is only gradually being addressed. For instance, the two major approaches to the study of teenage spirituality, the social psychological approach pioneered by Francis and the faith development approach which enhances the work of Fowler, only touch briefly upon gender as an issue. Nevertheless, used as complements to each other, these two approaches are still vital to our understanding of gender, faith and young people. Francis' use of attitude scales and scientific research methods has provided useful statistical data, and various post-Fowler studies have begun to address the issues of gender. The findings of both these theoretical approaches are drawn upon during the course of this study.

#### *Case study: Wendy's story*

Wendy is seventeen and studying for her A Levels at a Catholic comprehensive school. She is an articulate and intelligent young woman. Her ambition is to be a doctor like her father and she wants to get married and raise a family. The eldest of four children in a close

Catholic family, she spends her free time with her boyfriend. The gender issues raised by Wendy's story will be analysed in the following six sections which place her experiences and views in the context of relevant theoretical research.

### *Religious participation*

- Wendy is a regular attender at the morning Sunday mass at the city's Catholic church. She has forthright views on the mass which she believes is too rigid in terms of ritual and too morbid in atmosphere. For instance, she dislikes the use of incense and singing in Latin.

The statistics from the 1989 Church Census reveal that 25 per cent of the total church population in England are under the age of 15 and 7 per cent are aged between 15 and 19 years of age, roughly split 50:50 men and women – a substantial element of each congregation.<sup>5</sup> Although Wendy cites force of habit as her reason for continuing to go to church, in my research I found that the overwhelming response was that girls continued to go to church because the mother went and there was family pressure to do so. Family influence can obviously have an enormous effect on a child's churchgoing, but the interesting statistic here is that almost two-thirds of young people who stop going to church are boys. One explanation for this may come through an analysis of role expectations and learned sex roles in the socialization of children. Generally it is the mother who is the primary carer and has responsibility for religious training and development. Since mothers are more religiously active than fathers, religion more visibly relates to the mother's role. Nancy Chodorow has revealed how the quality of the mother-daughter relationship creates the psychological preconditions necessary for the 'reproduction' of learned behaviour in the next generation. It is expected that girls will be more religiously active and express their religiosity in a situation where their mothers exhibit these characteristics. It could also be argued that when the effect of gender on personality traits is examined, girls are shown to be prone to more feelings of guilt and therefore are more likely than boys to continue with their church-going.

### *Religious activity*

- Wendy is a member of the church choir which practises on a Friday night (much to her annoyance as this is her going-out night!).
- She reads in church when asked. Of this she says, 'It gives me something to do and stops me from thinking too much about not wanting to be there'.

- Her main difficulty lies in the fact that there are no girl altar-servers at her church. Wendy was so exasperated by this that she twice wrote to the pope about it, but nothing came of her petitioning.
- When asked about the relevance of the services to her life, she argues that they could be made more relevant if they were presented in a different way and the pomposity was eradicated.
- At the moment she says that the main reason why she goes to church is through habit.
- Wendy does not pray regularly and neither does she read the Bible.

In terms of religious activity, Wendy's personal experiences complement Leslie Francis' 1984 study which proved the often-voiced complaint that the tasks which girls are asked to carry out in church are different from those given to the boys.<sup>6</sup> His statistics show that serving after-service coffee is an overwhelmingly female task (30 per cent of girls present compared to 13 per cent of boys present), as is Sunday School teaching (four times more likely), whilst altar-serving shows a totally male bias (28 per cent to 4 per cent). Although other activities remain relatively gender-free, the effect on Wendy of the discrimination in altar-serving has given rise to feelings of negativity regarding her church. Frustration and a suppressed anger on this issue go beyond lack of opportunity and actually could be said to be harmful to her spiritual being. In Francis' survey, girls were shown to be more likely to pray every day than boys (48 per cent to 38 per cent), so Wendy's non-activity can be regarded as quite unusual.

### *Concepts of God*

- Her religious beliefs are very important to Wendy and they are something which she thinks about a great deal. She feels that her beliefs give her a different outlook on life from her non-practising friends, sometimes creating friction among her peer group.
- Perhaps not surprisingly, given her scientific leanings, Wendy senses a purpose to life and that God is in some way guiding her. As she says, we are not '... plodding round on this earth just to take up grass space'. In her view, everything happens for a reason and someone must have answers to what that reason is. Following this argument, Wendy's conclusion is that there must be a God.
- In terms of how she visualizes the divine, she has this to say:  
 I prefer the Holy Spirit kind of image, not the old man with the white frock on. Imagine a block of air which you could walk through and you felt scared on the outside, but when you walked in you felt safe. That's how I picture God, that little block of space.

In general, research has shown that girls' attitudes toward the Christian faith tend to be more positive than boys', with interestingly little gender-bias regarding statements as to the divinity of Jesus, life after death, or Christ's physical resurrection.<sup>7</sup> Experiential questions are, of their very nature, more difficult to quantify and assess and are perhaps not as suited to a closed-question approach adopted by social psychologists. Notwithstanding these difficulties, it has been suggested that religiosity among girls is of a more personal nature than the religiosity of boys.<sup>8</sup>

However, there are clear gender differences in Tamminen's study which indicate that girls report that they experience God's nearness, God's guidance and answers given to prayers more often than boys. In Francis' 1984 study, 89 per cent of the teenagers questioned reported having experienced God's guidance in their lives in some respect, although Francis does not split this statistic according to gender. Girls tend to emphasize God more as a giver of security and forgiveness whereas boys refer to God more as stern or frightening.<sup>9</sup> Although Wendy's concept of the Holy Spirit appears to be an illustration of this, studies by Francis in the British context do not add to this analysis.

So how can we assess these differences? Daphne Hampson argues that a transcendent monotheism and God conceived as 'male' have had the effect of consolidating a certain construal of gender and gender relations, giving male power the ultimate sanction.<sup>10</sup> From the psycho-analytical perspective, Freud's argument that God is a projection of our human father figure has been widely discussed, but the relationship between God and the idea of parents was not illuminated by Tamminen's study. Studies in European Catholic countries have shown that the influence of the mother-image is more frequently and strongly felt by boys and the father-image by women and by girls.<sup>11</sup> Another study, noted by Jacobs, has indicated that for adolescent boys the idea of God is more strongly marked by the concept of the Holy Virgin than by Christ, but the opposite is true of girls. Interestingly, Wendy's visualization of God as non-personal confutes these findings and alerts us to the possible difficulties in generalizing from contradictory research.

### *Personal morality*

- For Wendy the major impact of her beliefs appears to be in the area of sexual morality. She believes that the ideal is for sex to be kept for within marriage, not from any particular religious conviction but from seeing how early sexual activity in non-stable relationships has 'messed people up'. Although she has endured some friction over her beliefs she now feels that she is respected for her strong views.

- When asked about homosexuality, Wendy was at her most undecided. Whilst remaining unsure, she commented that men and women are 'made for each other' in the obvious biological way.

Wendy's firmly held views regarding various aspects of sexual morality can be commented on from both a Christian and a secular perspective. From the Christian, and in particular the Catholic, standpoint sexual ethics retain a high profile amongst churchgoing young women. Whether in church youth groups, at home or at school, there are constant and lively discussions on issues such as abortion and contraception, homosexuality and sex outside marriage. So it is perhaps not surprising that Wendy is highly sensitive to these debates. In addition, this is one area of teenage life where there may be conflicts arising between the traditional Christian perspective of women's sexuality (generally one of misunderstanding and suspicion) and secular attitudes.

From the secular perspective, our understanding of personal moral development and its relation to gender issues has been greatly enhanced by the work of Carol Gilligan, who has shown that young women approach moral reasoning differently from young men.

Both Piaget and Kohlberg have been extremely influential in terms of our understanding of moral development, although Kohlberg has been criticized for being gender-blind in his theorizing. Carol Gilligan fundamentally revised his moral development model by arguing that women's moral judgement is more contextual and relational than men's. Noting the disparity between women's experience and the representations of human development found in models such as Erikson's and Kohlberg's, she argues that a woman's different voice does not necessarily mean an inferior one. Gilligan identifies the fusion of identity and intimacy for women: an identity defined in the context of a relationship and judged by a standard of responsibility and care. These findings show that for young men and women, although the moral dilemma may be the same, it is approached from different perspectives.

#### *Faith development and personal identity*

- Wendy is constantly questioning and analysing her religious beliefs and the practices of her church; even at the age of thirteen she wanted answers to theological questions such as transubstantiation.
- She firmly locates authority within the self and does not grant the Church or its representatives any higher authority.
- Whilst staying firm to many Christian values, such as respect for the family as an institution, Wendy also holds secular values.

The faith development approach to gender issues in teenage spirituality can enhance our understanding of the links between adolescent development and faith development. In respect of identity formation, adolescence is a time of progression through states of confusion and insecurity to the ultimate integration of the personality into a new identity. This can be a time of conscious searching, of rebellion, or a less dramatic process of identification. The questioning of religious beliefs is one element of this process.

James Fowler, in his *Stages of faith*, describes a process in adolescence of growing separation and individuation and a shift from external to internal authority. This would appear to be illustrated by Wendy's story. However, recent studies show that women's faith can be seen more in terms of an 'holistic relationality'.<sup>12</sup> Devor, in a reworking of Fowler, proposes a pattern of development through ongoing relationship and responsibility, with separation occurring in the context of relationship.

In Michael Jacobs' model of faith development, adolescent independence is associated with what he terms 'co-operation and competition'. In this stage of individuating-reflective faith, authority is relocated within the self and Christian values are often replaced with equally conventional secular value systems. Wendy's account shows that the questioning of traditional beliefs in order to increase understanding is a part of the growing-up process. The way that churches handle this questioning can have serious consequences for the individual concerned, as we shall see in the next section.

### *The Church as a community and its attitude to young people*

- What effect does belonging to her church have on Wendy as an individual? Wendy is ambivalent about the Church and its authority. Whilst not avoiding help from the Church she would not actively seek it as she does not invest the Church with any particular or higher authority.
- Wendy's experience of the Church's attitude to her as an individual has not been a comfortable one. Apart from the issues of girl altar-servers, when she was 13 she asked advice from her priest on the issue of transubstantiation and was responded to in a flippant and dismissive manner. The experience of this patronizing attitude has remained with her and adds to the tarnished view which she has of the Church's attitude to young people.

The church community both reflects and reinforces the gender constructions prevalent in wider society, and in some situations it

challenges them. Although Wendy does not invest her Church with a higher authority, she is being influenced by the roles, attitudes and behaviour exhibited within it. Stereotypical images are acquired unconsciously, without our immediate knowledge or consent. The 'acquisition' of gender stereotypes is a process which begins early in life, usually before the age of five, and its completion takes place during adolescence.<sup>13</sup> In psychological terms, stereotypes such as those which define men as aggressive, active and rational and women as gentle, sensitive and passive are reinforced and promoted within the Christian tradition which has advocated an essentialist position regarding gender roles. There are very few gender-fair or gender-free images to counter-balance them, a situation which has been remarked upon by Christian feminists in a religious context.

Gender stereotypes also inform ethical positions and we have to consider the implications of self-sacrificing roles for women and active aggressive characteristics for men. Indeed, men are now confronting their own demons in the form of the crisis of intimacy; in adolescent boys the macho image can have a serious detrimental effect on health and emotional well-being.<sup>14</sup> The idea of complementarity, of men and women being equal but different, is not in itself repressive, but its long history of patriarchal interpretation has meant the justification of an attitude of intolerance for women and men who want to break out of the Christian mould.

Gender differences not only organize an individual's perception about themselves and others, but also enable the structuring of interpersonal behaviour. Social psychologists suggest that when people interact with one another, they use gender as the trigger to provide the appropriate response. Using this approach it can be argued that gender identity is not a static, unchanging presence but can best be described in terms of process rather than possession. Gender is not just something we have but something we do. Similarly, the claim at the heart of faith development theory is that there is a development through childhood and adulthood in our way of *being* in faith.<sup>15</sup> In a religious context, young people 'do' gender in their interaction within groups in the church community, such as youth groups, or in roles which they take for themselves within the Church. Sociologists argue that adolescence is a particularly crucial period for the construction of an individual's role repertoire. An integral feature of the development of the role repertoire is role change, both in the form of new role demands and the increase in expectations within a certain role. As Wendy has found, another major difficulty for a young person can be role conflict where



different expectations may be inherent in the various roles which the adolescent may be pressurized to resolve. For instance, the roles of daughter, churchgoer and girl-friend may not be entirely compatible, and churches and church leaders can often make unconscious, unrealistic demands on young people, especially in the realm of sexual morality.

The significance of gender to the understanding of young people's spirituality cannot be understated. In terms of a developing self-identity, gender ideologies in a religious context can have powerful and far-reaching social and psychological consequences, and many have yet to be examined as issues in their own right. Wendy's story has highlighted some key gender issues which are common to all young people. These issues relate to religious participation and activity, concepts of God, personal religiosity and moral reasoning, and the churches' attitude to faith development. All of these subjects raise further arguments regarding religious stereotyping and socialization processes. Traditional Christian models of gender relations can have negative as well as positive effects and young people are well aware of the contradictory nature of many of the debates which have brought these issues into the open. With so many young people leaving the Christian community, a critical reassessment of gender issues and teenage spirituality is both crucial and long overdue.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Gal 3: 28.

<sup>2</sup> See Carol Christ, 'Sojourners in the field of religious studies' in Kramarae and Spender (eds), *The knowledge explosion: generations of feminist scholarship* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), for an excellent summary.

For followers of the game of cricket 'the Lord's pavilion' epitomises male exclusivity. Women may not be members of Lord's cricket club in England, and certain areas of the club's pavilion are reserved exclusively for men. (Ed)

<sup>3</sup> Elaine Graham, *Making the difference: gender, personhood and theology* (London: Mowbray, 1995), p 222.

<sup>4</sup> Penelope Harrison in conversation with Barbara Harrison in Elaine Graham and Margaret Halsey (eds), *Life cycles: women and pastoral care* (London: SPCK, 1993), p 23.

<sup>5</sup> Peter Brierley (ed), *Christian England: what the 1989 English church census reveals* (1991), p 81.

<sup>6</sup> Leslie J. Francis, *Teenagers and the Church: a profile of church-going youth in the 1980s* (London: Collins, 1984), pp 42f.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 72f.

<sup>8</sup> Kalevi Tamminen, 'Gender differences in religiosity in children and adolescents' in Francis, Kay and Campbell (eds), *Research in religious education* (1996), pp 163-188.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p 174.

<sup>10</sup> Daphne Hampson, *After Christianity* (London: SCM Press, 1996), p 89.

<sup>11</sup> Michael Jacobs, *Living illusions: a psychology of belief* (London: SPCK, 1993), p 152.

<sup>12</sup> I am indebted to Nicola M. Slee's recent article, 'Further on from Fowler: post-Fowler faith development research' in Francis, Kay and Campbell (eds), *Research in religious education* (1996), pp 73–96.

<sup>13</sup> Rhoda Unger and Mary Crawford, *Women and gender: a feminist psychology* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1992), p 106.

<sup>14</sup> J. Michael Hester argues that masculinity can be 'redeemed' through a more relational and intimate life-style, based on the biblical models of Jonathan and David and Jesus, in his article, 'Men in relationships: redeeming masculinity' in Adrian Thatcher and Elizabeth Stuart (eds), *Christian perspectives on sexuality and gender* (Leominster: Gracewing, 1996), pp 84–97.

<sup>15</sup> The National Society, *How faith grows: faith development and Christian education* (London: Church House Publishing, 1991), p 2.

## God is a jigsaw



NE OF THE IMAGES I have of God is as a jigsaw. This is because God is made up of many pieces that fit together to make a complete picture, or in this case, a complete being. God is also like a jigsaw because a jigsaw is something built up in your own time and at your own speed. If you want to stop you can, because the work you have already done will not be undone. You can always come back and continue to build.

*Chrissie  
Australia*