

# Who tells the stories?

## Gender and the experience of the sacred

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**A**MONG THE NAVAJO PEOPLE THERE IS a proverb which says that 'those who tell the stories, rule the people'. Like most aphorisms, this statement can be taken as a simple description of the obvious, or it can invite us into further reflection. What might it tell us, for instance, about how we understand religious experience? Who has been telling the stories about the sacred in our community? And with what implications? The proverb is a reminder that those who have authority over the 'traditions' – the history, visions and values of a people – do not just preserve these narratives; they also shape, interpret and implement them according to their experiential horizon and perspective.

The current theological debate regarding male–female relationships arises from significantly differing approaches to Christian anthropology. Many church documents and related writings rely upon a culturally conditioned, patriarchal understanding of 'complementarity' to describe the relationship between women and men. Is there a more dynamic way in which to understand this relationship? Is there a more creative context in which we can envision the partnership between women and men as we begin the third millennium of Christian history?

In the history of the Church, the story of women's religious experience has often been ignored or even suppressed. Today the feminist critique of contemporary culture has enriched the way women regard themselves and has enabled us to retrieve lost traditions and viewpoints on the holy. It has, in turn, evoked an interest in men's religious experience and masculine spirituality. In this article, we provide a survey of these recent developments, and then focus on new models or ways of understanding the partnership between women and men.

### *Androcentrism and the story of the sacred*

With the emergence of historical criticism in the nineteenth century, it became clear that those who record the flow and events of

history are in fact also 'exegeting' the significance of these events from their vantage point. What is presumed to be 'scientific objectivity' is in fact a real, but unacknowledged, cultural 'hermeneutic', a socially conditioned way of viewing reality that is presumed to be normative. Those who tell the stories – including, and perhaps even especially, those holding positions of religious authority – also shape their meaning and interpret their consequences for the rest of the community. The dominance of male consciousness in narrating and interpreting the meaning of religious experience has been widely chronicled by scholars in the last forty years.

For approximately the last four-and-a-half millennia of human history – roughly speaking since about 2,500 BCE – in the majority of the world religions, male persons with economic and educational resources have been in charge of telling the stories of creation, sexuality, birth, life, death, good, evil and the meaning of the sacred.

### *Reclaiming women's stories*

Although it has many common themes, the contemporary feminist movement is the outcome of a diverse set of practical concerns, cultural perspectives and differing philosophical outlooks. It began as a grass-roots political process during the early 1960s in economically developed countries as a movement for women's rights in the workplace. In this context, the women's movement was primarily concerned about access to employment, equal pay and opportunities for advancement. Related to this pursuit of civil rights, but somewhat independent of it, was a second movement which went beyond employment issues and civil rights to reclaim women's experience and stories in broader cultural, philosophical and religious terms.

This 'second wave'<sup>1</sup> – as many scholars have referred to it – has become the more encompassing and influential path of feminist consciousness in our time. It, in turn, has had three phases.<sup>2</sup> These phases are not so much chronological distinctions as they are emerging tasks within the evolution of the women's movement. The first stage was a time of *retrieval*, in which feminist scholars explored areas of human experience usually overlooked in traditional approaches to history – the settings of family, kinship, birth, childhood, sexuality and the rituals of care for the frail and dying. These studies enabled the hidden life of women and their essential role in child-bearing, food production and domestic labour to re-emerge. On university and college campuses this phase was identified with the appearance of 'women's studies'. In the religious sphere it included the task of

reclaiming the vital role of women in the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures, as well as the long neglected influence of women in the history of theology and spirituality. Obviously we must acknowledge that, for the most part, women's religious experience was not honoured, recognized or recorded and is therefore not available to our shared human memory.

The second phase can be characterized as a period of *critical deconstruction*. As scholars began to listen more carefully to the experience of women and their role in shaping society, it became increasingly clear that western culture, history and literature needed to be critically reassessed and reinterpreted. Feminist scholars challenged both the assumptions and the content of the existing accounts of events and their meaning; they also laid bare the origins and sources of male domination over women's lives, relationships and bodies, as well as the social and religious systems which enshrined or institutionalized these oppressive attitudes. It should be noted that lesbian women and scholars also played a vital role in this critical phase, in that, among other things, they challenged the assumption of heterosexuality as normative.

The third phase of the movement can be described as a period of *affirming reconstruction* – the effort to reinterpret all of history from the point of view of women's experience. One of the significant turning points in pushing this task forward occurred when Third World women began demanding that their voices and experience be heard. They reminded other feminist scholars that economically privileged women are no more normative for humankind than privileged men.<sup>3</sup> Expanding the circle of dialogue to include women from other ethnic and social backgrounds made it clear that in addition to gender, one must also take into account other aspects of diversity as well, including economic and cultural differences, and the defining characteristics of personality, temperament and unique historical circumstances.

### ***Male responses and movements***

The cultural response of men to the contemporary feminist movement has been diverse, wide ranging and at times contradictory. It has variously taken the form of psychic denial, self-recrimination, masculinity therapy, mythopoetic regrounding, the pursuit of gay rights, angry political retrenchment, new-right religious populism and, in some instances, an enlightened and intentional solidarity with feminism in the quest for justice and partnership in human

relationships. If the women's movement came to life as a political pursuit of justice, the male movement, in contrast, began during the 1970s as a self-referenced, therapeutic need to break out of the traditional male role and become more sensitive and emotionally expressive.<sup>4</sup>

This initial resonance with the feminist movement through 'consciousness raising' was soon replaced in the 1980s by male writers who reacted strongly against what they perceived as the emergence of 'soft masculinity'. In the United States, Robert Bly<sup>5</sup> and other writers believed that men should not accept the blame for gender inequality; instead they should acknowledge and celebrate their differences from women by reclaiming the 'wild man' and the 'deep masculine', and healing the 'father wound' created by a technological society.

Several male writers and therapists who initially had been in sympathy with the feminist movement became increasingly disillusioned and suspicious toward it.<sup>6</sup> Thus, in the 1990s, alongside a spirit of collaboration and/or compliance among some men, we have also witnessed the reassertion of masculine hegemony in everything from the 'gun lobby' to explicit sexual violence against women in films, TV and other forms of cultural media.

### *Reclaiming the dialogue between the genders*

At any time of radical change, there is an inevitable period of ideological conflict and relational polarity. Difficult and painful as this may be for individuals and societies, this conflictual stage appears to be a necessary step toward a new level of understanding and a gradual restructuring of human institutions. On a global scale this fermentation around women's rights and equality – and the resulting social and cultural conflicts – is still in its early stages. As we approach the beginning of the next millennium, in almost all areas of the world men continue to monopolize political, economic and religious positions of power. Nevertheless, the question of gender equality has been raised in a definitive and prophetic manner; a new beachhead of consciousness has been established. This emerging energy of transformation will probably continue to encounter major obstacles and forms of resistance, but it will not go away.

Even now in the early stirrings of what promises to be a prolonged time of conflict and change, it is not too early to begin seeking ways of creative dialogue between women and men. Ultimately the new ground of creative and mutual partnership between women

and men cannot be discovered in isolation from one another. Some of this 'bridging' work has already been taking place. Feminist scholars have moved from women's studies to feminist studies, and now to gender studies. Gender, in this context, is being understood as a complex, culturally constructed form of social roles, rather than something which is biologically determined or ontologically given.<sup>7</sup>

In the male movement there are significant voices that are moving beyond therapeutic or religious attempts to adapt patriarchal attitudes to modern exigencies. For example, the British writer, John Rowan,<sup>8</sup> believes that the task at hand is not the restoration of primal masculinity, nor the promotion of androgyny, but a transformational change in the relationship between women and men. The quest for equality for gay, lesbian and bisexual persons has also moved the discussion beyond that of heterosexual women and men to the broader issues of sexuality, justice and relational equality. The growing concern regarding the gap between rich and poor nations and the emerging environmental crisis has also served to connect gender concerns with other global issues of justice.

### *The current role of the Church in the gender dialogue*

What role can the Church take in the search for new models of partnership between women and men? At present, ecclesiastical documents and most official church writing employ the rhetoric of equality, but place it in the rabbinic and patriarchal context of 'complimentarity' between the sexes. If the Church is truly to be *lumen gentium* – a light for the human community – we must develop a different philosophical starting point with which to approach this vital issue.

For much of the Church's history, the issue of the relationship between the genders was approached from the culturally conditioned perspective of patriarchy. From its earliest writings, the Church began to dialogue with and integrate many of the principles and assumptions of Graeco-Roman philosophy. For all the beauty and coherence of the medieval theological syntheses, the scholastic philosophers also incorporated a view that placed women clearly below men on the hierarchical 'ladder of being'.

Today the Church recognizes that some of these philosophical and theological stances were culturally conditioned and are in need of being revised in accord with gospel values. On the level of civil and social justice, for example, the Church has for some time acknowledged that the inequality between men and women is no longer a

valid political perspective. Though at first suspicious of and resistant to the democratic and egalitarian movements of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, with the publication of *Rerum novarum* in 1891 the Church assumed a more visible role as a champion of human dignity, social justice and respect for life in all its dimensions.

There remain, however, two areas of difficulty with the way in which the official Church approaches the question of equality between women and men. The first has to do with the anthropological basis which most church documents employ to maintain the differences between women and men, while at the same time affirming their equality. This theology of complementarity extrapolates from a biologically predetermined understanding of gender roles to locate women in a socially margined zone. In this androcentric perspective, women have a 'special role' because of their natural, physical destiny as mothers and carers. Similarly, according to this view, it is God's creative intention that women be subordinate in role and state, but equal in dignity to men. In this sense it would be 'unnatural' for a woman to assume a leadership role in society or in the church community.<sup>9</sup>

The second problematic area is related to the way in which official church language understands Jesus Christ as the fullness of humanity. Has Jesus, the crucified and risen One, become the *prodromos* (cf. Heb 6:20, literally the 'forerunner') of humanity specifically in his maleness or because he brings to fulfilment what it means to be inclusively a human being? The current language of the Church (e.g. 'ontological difference' and *in persona Christi*) emphasizes Christ's maleness as the condition of his mediatorial role. It appears to be blocked by posing the question in this manner. If Christ is the embodiment of the new humanity precisely in his maleness, how can women share in his fullness?

### *In search of new models of partnership*

How can these theological difficulties best be overcome? What is necessary to move the discussion regarding the relationship between women and men beyond its current impasse? We propose four areas of reflection as potential avenues toward opening the dialogue at a more generative level. These include: reframing the questions in the context of a more inclusive Christian anthropology; reclaiming the gospel horizon for relational ethics; refocusing our commitment to

communion-in-diversity and incorporating conceptual models from the 'new science' and their applicability to male-female partnership.

### ***Toward a renewed Christian anthropology***

Every search begins with questions. Progress in human understanding, whether in science or philosophical thought, usually comes about when we are forced to recognize that the currently accepted responses to human growth are no longer adequate. As our world-view begins to change, we are challenged to renew the quest. The ground of meaning shifts, and suddenly we are facing new questions. It is only when we name the new questions that we can begin to articulate more adequate responses. In today's emerging global culture, how should the question of gender be posed?

Many contemporary feminist theologians and other scholars are suggesting that in order to break the current impasse in ecclesiastical language, we need to pose the questions from a different perspective. The danger, in both non-religious as well as religious spheres, is that we too easily fall back on dichotomous categories and ways of thinking. We either overemphasize equality at the expense of difference by embracing an unnuanced version of androgyny, or we exalt difference at the expense of equality by clinging to biologically based, androcentric versions of gender roles. The challenge for contemporary Christian anthropology is to keep both equality and difference in creative tension. This emerging anthropological vision invites us to ask the question of gender relationships not in terms of how women are equal *but* different. Rather, it poses the question in terms of: How are women and men equal *and* different? How do women and men share equally in the fullness of being human, while at the same time experiencing and expressing that humanity in different ways?

What implications does this more integrative approach have for contemporary theology? First, it challenges us to reread the Genesis stories from a nonsexist perspective, and to recognize that the dominance-submission attitude which the sacred author clearly attributes to the consequences of sin (Gen 3:14-24) has been widely and mistakenly interpreted as being inherent in the order of nature. The creative intention of God is clearly that of mutuality and equality between women and men. Second, a renewed Christian anthropology invites us to see Jesus as the realization of full humanity, not exclusively in his biological maleness, but in his full human personhood. A Christ-centred anthropology recognizes that women as well as

men participate in the same graced humanity that Jesus redeemed and brought to fullness through his paschal journey.<sup>10</sup>

*Reclaiming the gospel vision of relational ethics*

The key to the next step in our search for partnership between women and men may well lie in returning to the primal vision of relationships as it is embodied in the ministry and teaching of Jesus. Over the centuries, as Church, we have tended to focus our ethical concerns on individual sexual acts in terms of their physical nature and purpose. It is striking that specific sexual behaviours are seldom addressed in the New Testament writings. From the gospel accounts we learn that Jesus' first concern was to confront attitudes of arrogance, oppression and exclusivity on the part of the dominant culture and religious leaders. His encounter with God as unconditional and compassionate love becomes the basis of his boundary-breaking ministry and teaching about the reign of God. If, through the experience of Jesus, everyone can have access to becoming a 'beloved of God,' then human and religious structures must take on a radical new form. It is no longer possible to accept patriarchal patterns as divinely pre-ordained structures in human life. The circle of human relationships (Mk 3:31–35) is, like divine love itself, an open and inclusive embrace of all persons.

The gospel vision on matters of sexuality and gender is a radical challenge to the oppressive and violent system of socially approved gender roles and familial relations that predominated in the ancient world.<sup>11</sup> Jesus replaces the prevailing Jewish 'code of holiness' and its oppressive, marginating rules of cultic purity with a 'code of compassion' which seeks to create mutuality between women and men.<sup>12</sup>

In her work on Christian ethics, Lisa Sowle Cahill makes it clear that the sexual conduct which the New Testament writers sought to proscribe were status-making, boundary-erecting, other-dominating, and self-promoting actions and practices.<sup>13</sup> It is not the sparse norms for specific sexual behaviours which should draw our attention, since the historical differences involving culture and worldview are too different; rather it is the clear ethical challenge of Jesus and his early followers, who sought to dismantle all social structures which dehumanize or marginalize persons.

What effect would it have on current church teaching and practice if we reclaimed this central emphasis in the early Christian writings?



How might this help us move beyond the present impasse in language and theological categories?

***Refocusing our commitment to communion-in-diversity***

There is strong evidence in the authentic Pauline writings that the early communities took 'the dangerous and subversive' memory of Jesus, his life, his ministry and his teaching about a 'discipleship of equals' very seriously. The earliest and most important centre for the Christian missionary movement was Antioch, where a progressive community of disciples sought to live out the boundary-breaking vision of Jesus by taking his vision beyond the confines of Judaism to embrace the rest of the Mediterranean world. It is likely that Paul received his ministerial formation here and several scholars believe that the striking declaration of Galatians 3:22-27 is in fact quoted from the Antioch community's 'mission statement'. In any case, we certainly hear strong echoes here of Jesus' own confrontation with marginalizing and oppressive social structures, as the early communities committed themselves to live out the mystery of communion in the crucified and Risen One by struggling against *racism* ('neither Jew nor Greek'), *classism* ('neither slave nor free'), and *sexism* ('neither male nor female').

In the opening paragraphs of *Pacem in terris* (1963), John XXIII outlines what he describes as the three most significant prophetic signs of the contemporary world. Ironically, he points to concerns in the contemporary world that strikingly parallel those of the earliest communities of Christianity: the emergence of developing nations (confronting global racism); the emancipation of the worker (overcoming classism); and women claiming their rightful place in society (challenging sexism). If the Church were to respond prophetically to the signs of our age, it would mean placing gender equality and mutuality on the same level as its commitment to overcoming poverty and racism.

The genius of the gospel vision is its 'catholicity' – its willingness to embrace and celebrate communion-within-diversity and equality-within-difference. What if we were to take seriously John XXIII's prophetic challenge and reclaim Galatians 3:26-27 as the contemporary 'mission statement' for our Church? What kind of impact might this have in our families, parishes, schools and seminaries in helping to move forward the call for authentic partnership between women and men?

*Gender relationships and the new science*

Are feminist issues a cultural 'fad' limited to consumerist, economically developed nations? Are concerns about equality and mutuality between women and men just a popular idea that church leadership can sit out until it goes away? Grass-roots studies on a global scale and the insights of contemporary science tell us that this is not a passing phase, but a journey toward new and significant levels of human consciousness.

In the course of the twentieth century, revolutionary discoveries in quantum physics, chaos theory and biology have unveiled the participatory nature of the universe and the influence that invisible energy fields have on the ongoing process of creation. This 'new science' also provides us with parallel insights into the 'morphogenic fields' of human relationships and invites us to develop new models of understanding male-female mutuality.<sup>14</sup> The contemporary social movements toward collaborative participation, democratic processes and gender mutuality are rooted, perhaps archetypally through our 'psychic genes', in what we have come to know as the organizing principles of the universe.

Quantum theory reveals that the universe thrives and delights in *relationship* and *diversity* in an unfolding journey of *transformative change*. The Newtonian model of the universe focused on physical things in the search for the basic building blocks of matter. In the new science, the focus is more holistic and relational; it looks for the interconnectedness of all reality – the dynamic energy fields and relationships that create such profligate and wondrous diversity. Donella Meadows, a systems thinker, quotes an ancient Sufi teaching that captures this shift in focus: 'You think because you understand *one* you must understand *two*, because one and one make two. But you must also understand *and*.'<sup>15</sup>

From our scriptural roots and our trinitarian, incarnational spirituality, Catholic theology has treasured the centrality of relationships. We have not, however, been as comfortable with diversity. The history of western culture is unfortunately often a story of the fear and suspicion of the 'other'. 'Difference' has all too often denoted a sense of otherness, which in turn implied inferiority. Those who were not considered to be the 'norm' (white, male etc.) were looked upon as lesser than, and therefore not worthy of belonging or being able to engage in equal partnership.

Today's science has reclaimed the giftedness of diversity, the paradox of creation as difference-in-communion, equality-in-diversity. As

a believing community we can discern important new pathways for male-female partnership and dialogue from these creative insights.

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## NOTES

1 Cf Linda Nicholson (ed), *The second wave: a reader in feminist theory* (New York and London: Routledge, 1997).

2 We are indebted to Anne Murphy, 'The lenses of gender', *The Way* (October 1996), pp 323-330, for her helpful summary of these phases.

3 Linda Nicholson (ed), *Second wave*, pp 3-4.

4 An expanded description of this approach can be found in R. W. Connell, *Masculinities* (Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 1995), p 206ff.

5 Cf especially his influential work, *Iron John: a book about men* (Reading MA: Addison-Wesley, 1990).

6 A striking example of this is Warren Farrell, who in his earlier work, *The liberated man, beyond masculinity: freeing men and their relationships with women* (New York: Random House, 1974), was a leader in helping men understand feminist issues. In contrast, his later writing, especially *The myth of male power: why men are the disposable sex* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993), reverts to a more defensive, 'traditional' approach to male identity.

7 Cf Elizabeth Castelli and James McBride, 'Beyond the language and memory of the Fathers: feminist perspectives in religious studies' in Pamela R. Frese and John M. Coggeshall (eds), *Transcending boundaries: multi-disciplinary approaches to the study of gender* (New York and London: Bergin & Garvey, 1991), pp 115-117.

8 John Rowan, *The horned god: feminism and men as wounding and healing* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987).

9 For a further exploration of this thematic, cf Catherine Mowry LaCugna, 'God in communion with us' in Catherine Mowry LaCugna (ed), *Freeing theology: the essentials of theology in feminist perspective* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), pp 83-114.

10 Cf Janet K. Ruffing RSM, 'Theological anthropology' in Michael Downey (ed), *The new dictionary of Catholic spirituality* (Collegeville MN: Liturgical Press, 1993), p 48.

11 For further background on this issue, cf Fran Ferder and John Heagle, *Partnership: women and men in ministry* (Notre Dame IN: Ave Maria Press, 1989), pp 59-73.

12 Cf Marcus Borg, *Meeting Jesus again for the first time: the historical Jesus and the heart of contemporary faith* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1994), pp 46-68.

13 Lisa Sowle Cahill, *Sex, gender and Christian ethics* (Cambridge University Press, 1996), cf especially pp 121-165.

14 Cf Margaret J. Wheatley, *Leadership and the new science: learning about organization from an orderly universe* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 1992), pp 60-73.

15 *Ibid.*, p 9.