



PHILOSOPHY OF CHRISTIAN FEMINISM

Dr. John Christopher Kommalapudi

Department of Philosophy
Andhra University, Visakhapatnam
Andhra Pradesh, India

Feminist philosophy of religion poses feminist questions about religious texts, traditions, and practices, often with the aim of evaluating, redefining, or reconstructing in the light of gender discriminations. Feminist philosophy provides a critical understanding of various religious concepts that defines, sanctions, and sometimes challenges gender roles and gender-inflected representations. The first wave of feminism in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries included an increased interest in the place of women in religion. Women who were campaigning for their rights began to question their inferiority both within the church and in other spheres justified by church teachings.¹

Katharine Bushnell (1856-1946) was a Christian writer, physician, medical missionary to China, and Bible scholar skilled in both Hebrew and Greek, and social activist. Of particular interest to her was the status of women in the Bible, believing it had been mistranslated and misinterpreted. She was a forerunner of feminist theology. Her lifelong quest was for biblical affirmation of the integrity and equality of women.² Frances Elizabeth Caroline Willard (1839-1898) was an American educator, temperance reformer, and women's suffragist. Her influence was instrumental in the passage of the Eighteenth (Prohibition) and Nineteenth (Women Suffrage) Amendments to the United States Constitution. Willard became the national president of the World Woman's Christian Temperance Union, or World WCTU, in 1879, and remained president for 19 years. She developed the slogan "Do everything" for the women of the WCTU to incite lobbying, petitioning, preaching, publication, and education. Her vision progressed to include federal aid to education, free school lunches, unions for workers, the eight-hour work day, work relief for the poor, municipal sanitation and boards of health, national transportation, strong anti-rape laws, and protections against child abuse.³ Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815-1902) was an American social activist, abolitionist, and leading figure of the early woman's movement. Her Declaration of Sentiments, presented at the first women's rights convention held in 1848 in Seneca Falls, New York, is often credited with initiating the first organized woman's rights and woman's suffrage movements in the United States.⁴

Christian feminism is a part of feminist theology which tries to find out the equality of men and women morally, in all aspects from a Christian point of view. Christian feminists argue that contributions by women in that direction are necessary for a complete understanding of Christianity.⁵ Christian feminists believe that God does not discriminate on the basis of biologically-determined characteristics such as sex and race.⁶ Their major issues include the ordination of women, male dominance in



Christian marriage, recognition of equal spiritual and moral abilities, reproductive rights, and the search for a feminine or gender-transcendent divine.⁷ Christian feminists often draw on the teachings of other religions and ideologies in addition to biblical evidence.⁸

Egalitarianism:

According to Christian Egalitarianism, gender equality in Christian church leadership and in Christian marriage is biblically sound. Christian Egalitarianism holds that all people are equal before God and in Christ. All have equal responsibility to use their gifts and obey their calling to the glory of God. God freely calls believers to roles and ministries without regard to class, gender, or race.⁹ Ultimately, Egalitarianism holds that all human persons are equal in fundamental worth and moral status. This view does not just apply to gender, but to religion, and any other differences between individuals. The Apostle Paul wrote: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."¹⁰

Christian Egalitarians believe that full partnership in an equal marriage is the most biblical view. As persons, husband and wife are of equal value. There is no priority of one spouse over the other. In truth, they are one. The Apostle Paul's statement sometimes was called the "Magna Carta of Humanity."¹¹

Complementarianism:

Complementarianism is a theological view held by some in Christianity that men and women have different but complementary roles and responsibilities in marriage, family life, religious leadership, and elsewhere. The word "complementary" and its cognates are currently used to denote this view. For those whose complementarian view is biblically-prescribed, these separate roles preclude women from specific functions of ministry within the Church.¹²

The complementarian view of marriage asserts gender-based roles in marriage.¹³ A husband is considered to have the God-given responsibility to provide for, protect, and lead his family. A wife is to collaborate with her husband, respect him, and serve as his helper in managing the household and nurturing the next generation. Complementarians assert that the Bible instructs husbands to lovingly lead their families and to love their wives as Christ loves the Church, and instructs wives to respect their husbands' leadership out of reverence for Christ. The husband is also meant to hold moral accountability for his wife and to exhibit a sacrificial love for her. The wife is meant to respond to her husband's love for her with love in-kind and by receiving his service and leadership willingly.

Complementarian and Christian Egalitarian views need not be mutually exclusive, according to some recent proposals that one can subscribe both to Complementarianism and Christian egalitarianism. This theoretically would allow men and women to complement each other without any form of hierarchy. This view argues that the Bible prescribes both equality and complementary positions and roles for both men and women.¹⁴

Roman Catholic complementarianism has generally advocated roles for women



as teachers, mothers and nuns. Some traditionally Roman Catholic countries have been called matriarchal because of the high value that was placed on women, and there are numerous women who have been beatified and who are venerated among the saints. However, the Roman Catholic Church restricts ordination to men, since the Lord Jesus chose men (viri) to form the college of the twelve apostles, and the apostles did the same when they chose collaborators to succeed them in their ministry.

Women in Church Leadership:

The Roman Catholic Church has formally opposed radical egalitarianism and has stated that the differences between men and women are not merely phenomenal, but are in fact ontological in nature.¹⁵ However, the Roman Catholic church, the Orthodox Christian churches, the Southern Baptist Convention (the largest Protestant denomination in the U.S.), The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and most churches in the American Evangelical movement prohibit women from entering clerical positions.¹⁶

In both mainline and liberal branches of Protestant Christianity, women are ordained as clergy. Even some theologically conservative denominations, such as Assemblies of God, ordain women as pastors.¹⁷ In his 2004 Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and in the World, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger warned against a related tendency to see gender as culturally constructed, which has generated “a new model of polymorphous sexuality,” which reflects an “attempt to be free from one’s biological conditioning.”¹⁸

Gender Roles in Christianity:

Gifts from God, a belief among Christians, and how we use them are likewise fashioned by gender roles. There are numerous gifts mentioned in the Bible; they include: prophesying, serving, teaching, encouraging, contributing to the needs of others, leadership, showing mercy, message of wisdom, message of knowledge, faith, gifts of healing, miraculous power, distinguishing between spirits, speaking in different kinds of tongues, and church administration. An important point to bring out to students is that no where are gifts presented as gender specific. Instead, we are told in Romans 12:6 that “We have different gifts, according to the grace given us” and in 1 Corinthians 12:4 that “There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit.” Yet, if we were to assign gifts according to traditional gender traits, many gifts would fall squarely under masculine traits, e.g., leadership and church administration, and others under feminine traits, e.g., serving and encouraging. Furthermore, in Romans 12:6-8, the importance of using our gifts is stressed, pleading if one’s gift is prophesying, let the person prophesy; if it is serving, let the person serve; if it is teaching, let the person teach; if it is encouraging, let the person encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let the person give generously; if it is leadership, let the person govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let the person do it cheerfully.

Finally, the commandment, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:39) shoots straight at conceptions of gender. Throughout history and the world



today, one sex is mistreated at the hands of the other due to sexist ideology, practices, and laws. Furthermore, without an education in gender roles, Christians who enter the missions field may be ill-equipped to love their neighbors whose ways are so far from their own. In addition, the new commandment: “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another” (John 31:34) sets a holy example of how we are to treat one another, male and female.

The modern feminist movement has brought into sharp focus the role of Christian women in the church and home. It has caused a great controversy and many denominations have changed their positions on the role of women and now have women preachers, deacons. Many justify their change in position saying the Bible discriminates against women and state Paul’s writings reflect his anti-female bias. Many just state what the Bible says is out dated and not in line with modern thought and was only a cultural restriction that applied in Paul’s day. The result has been that some have reinterpreted the passages that deals with women in Scripture and ignoring sound biblical interpretation have given these scriptures a meaning in line with the feminist movement.

REFERENCES

- ¹ Capitani, Diane., “*Imagining God in Our Ways: The Journals of Frances E. Willard.*” *Feminist Theology: The Journal of the Britain & Ireland School of Feminist Theology* 12.1 (2003):57-88.
- ² Kroeger, Catherine C., “*The Legacy of Katherine Bushnell: a Hermeneutic for Women of Faith.*” *Priscilla Papers*, Fall 1995.
- ³ Willard, Frances., Donawerth, Jane. ed. *Rhetorical Theory by Women before 1900: an Anthology.* Rowmand and Littlefield. (2002), pp. 241–254.
- ⁴ New York Times. October 27, 1902.
- ⁵ Harrison, Victoria S., “*Modern Women, Traditional Abrahamic Religions and Interpreting Sacred Texts.*” *Feminist Theology: The Journal of the Britain & Ireland School of Feminist Theology* 15.2 (2007), pp. 145-159.
- ⁶ McPhillips, Kathleen., “*Theme: Feminisms, Religions, Cultures, Identities.*” *Australian Feminist Studies* 14.30 (1999).
- ⁷ Polinska, Wioleta., “*In Woman’s Image: An Iconography for God.*” *Feminist Theology* 13.1 (2004), pp. 40-61
- ⁸ Clack, Beverly., “*Theology and Theology: Mutually Exclusive or Creatively Interdependent?*” *Feminist Theology: The Journal of the Britain & Ireland School of Feminist Theology* 21 (1999), pp. 21-38.



- ⁹ Padgett, Alan G, “*What Is Biblical Equality?*” Priscilla Papers, Summer 2002, 16:3
- ¹⁰ Scofield, C.I., The Bible, Galatians 3:28.
- ¹¹ Jewett, Paul K., *Man As Male and Female: A Study in Sexual Relationships from a Theological Point of View*. Eerdmans, 1990, p. 142.
- ¹² Wright, N.T., “*Women’s Service in the Church: The Biblical Basis.*” 4 Sep 2004.
- ¹³ The 2000 Baptist Faith and Message, Southern Baptist Convention.
- ¹⁴ Ronald W. Pierce, Rebecca Merrill Groothuis, Gordon D. Fee (eds.), *Discovering Biblical Equality: Complementarity Without Hierarchy*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005.
- ¹⁵ National Catholic Reporter, The Independent News Weekly, Rome: July, 31, 2004.
- ¹⁶ Spring Link Journal, Volume 19, No. 2.
- ¹⁷ “*The Role of Women in Ministry*”, The General Council of the Assemblies of God. 14-08-1990, p. 7.
- ¹⁸ Vatican Information Services, 31-07-2004.

