

ANDROCENTRISM Weakens Church and Society

by Tarcísio Beal

If there is anything that has weakened the Catholic Church and most human societies for many centuries, it is institutional androcentrism. The males' denial of equal rights and opportunities for women has been turned into a major component of society and still continues to be so—West and East, North and South. Worse yet, androcentrism has often been turned into misogyny, that is, hatred/despise of women. It is so widespread and so resilient mostly because it has received the blessing of religions wholly controlled by males.

Christianity inherited androcentrism from both the ancient Hebrews, who borrowed it from tribal Mesopotamia, then from the Greco-Roman culture, especially from its mythology. Mesopotamian tribes viewed sexuality from the male viewpoint, namely, as a form of domination. The woman was seen as an abnormality, her vagina as a wound, and her menstrual bleeding as a form of castration. Tribal patriarchy restricted the social relations of women to the point of prohibiting her from seating at the table with the males so as not to curse the food that fed their power. These tribal taboos were adopted by the Torah and the Talmud, the major law codes of ancient Israel.

The community of ancient Israel mirrored the rights and privileges of the males in all laws that carried religious duties (Ex. 20: 19; 22: 22-24; Lev. 13: 9, 40; Numbers 6: 2), and society was defined as a religious community of adult males (Ex. 19: 14-15; Ju. 7: 2; 4: 13); the spouse was seen as the exclusive property of the husband (Lev. 20: 10, 14); and circumcision was only for boys, not for girls.

Androcentrism, although not present in the Epistles of Paul, appeared as very strong among the Church Fathers, who concocted the silliest arguments to justify what they believed to be male superiority. Tertullian (d. 245) criticized women who wore colorful dresses by arguing that if God had wished them to do so, He would have created scarlet sheep. He also claimed that women wore cosmetics and fancy clothes in order to trap men more easily into sexual relations. Clement of Alexandria (150-216) contended that Adam was seduced by Eve in paradise before God had a chance to unite them in matrimony. So Eve was the prostitute, and Adam the victim. St. Augustine (354-430), the most influential of the Church Fathers, was, during his younger, Manichean days, an abuser of young women. Manicheans viewed sex and material creation as the work of Satan. He identified monism and spirituality with the male and dualism and femininity with corporeality. So – says Augustine - the subordination of the



There was a time when a witch hunt led to the deaths of thousands of innocent people, mostly women. The term “witch hunt” has now become synonymous with men’s fear of being unjustly persecuted or “hunted” for crimes they claim they did not commit. Image: Witchcraft at Salem Village. Engraving. The central figure in this 1876 illustration of the courtroom is usually identified as Mary Walcott. –Wikimedia Commons

female to the male is a law of nature because it parallels the subordination of the body to the spirit. His writings portray the woman as God’s image only in her rational soul, not in her sexuated body. He adds that after the Fall/original sin, marriage is the inferior way and virginity is intrinsically superior to marriage. St. Jerome (31-420) went to the point of advising young ladies to stay away from home if their mothers were still sexually active, that is, polluted. Since up to the 12th century, most clergymen were married, they were advised by Rome to live as if they were not married and to deny their spouses the sexual pleasures. In fact, Pope Leo I, who ruled the Church from 440 to 461, already

tried to implement such order in the 6th century.

The Middle Ages inherited the androcentrism of the Church Fathers and added even more anti-female arguments, even some malicious injunctions. Pope Gregory I (d. 604) allowed clergymen to marry if they could not control their sexual desires, but they were to abstain from sex at least 24 hours before administering the sacraments or celebrating mass. In the year 600, he sent a letter to Augustine, Archbishop of Canterbury, repeating the Old Testament’s anti-female injunctions: that women, after giving birth to a boy, must stay away from the church for a minimum of 33 days; and 66 days if the newborn was a girl. Gratian’s Decree (1140), which became the basis of Canon Law, states that “the woman is not created after God’s image.”

St. Thomas Aquinas (1227-1274) repeats Aristotle’s nonsense that “the woman is a defective human being because she is the offspring of a fall suffered by the spermatozoid while trying to become a male.” For him, Eve’s seduction of Adam was punished by placing her under the domination of the male. Furthermore – adds Aquinas – during the sexual act, which must always carry the intention of procreation, the woman must remain totally passive. This reminds me of the only statement from my Manual of Theology (authored by the Austrian Hieronymus Noldin) that escaped the censor (all other pages dealing with sex were glued together): “Mulier succumbat, et vir incumbat” (The woman underneath, and the man on top).

No surprise, then, that anti-female prejudices and nonsense became part of Church’s legislation and definitely shaped its institutional behavior, shutting down women from their rights within the Catholic community, including the priesthood. In 1089, Urban II ordered expelled from the priesthood those who kept meeting

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Irene L. Moorman

Black Suffragettes

After the 19th Amendment was ratified in 1920, Black women voted in elections and held political offices. However, many states passed laws that discriminated against African Americans and limited their freedoms. Black women in the Women's Suffrage Movement often found themselves excluded in conferences. And, while black suffragettes worked for issues such as anti-lynching laws, the women's suffrage movement did not. Full voting rights for African Americans were not achieved until the 1965 Voting Rights Act passed.

Sarah Jane Smith
Thompson Garnet

In the late 1700s the right to vote began when only white male landowners were granted this right. All others were not considered in position to have this right. Since those times, the women's suffrage movement broke open the path for the 19th amendment, to remove barriers to voting rights for all citizens over the age of eighteen.

The book, "*The Woman's Hour: The Great Fight to Win the Vote*" (Viking), by the journalist Elaine Weiss, describes the steps forward and back again, that took place in the weeks leading up to the suffrage victory. Political strategic considerations of how the female vote could sway political agendas and policies, was done by members of both parties in government. These political agendas became more important than the vote to enfranchise women as full-fledged citizens with inherent rights. The book also gives account to the other ideas which prevailed causing opposition, many recognizable even today. Opponents invoked the ideas of women's supposed emotional instability and intellectual deficiencies, the danger to society of anything that distracted them from their domestic duties as wives and mothers, and the threat to the moral order should they bother themselves with politics. "Some argued that most women did not even want the right to vote, others that the expanded electorate would be an expen-

sive burden on municipalities." (ref. *The Woman's Hour*)

These new histories; as told in the books, *The Woman's Hour*, *The Women's Suffrage Movement*, *Why They Marched*; suggest that the struggle for women's suffrage does not just extend further into the past than we thought; it also extends to the present, and the future.

The struggles behind the suffrage victory foreshadows the vulnerability of voting rights today, when even those who have the right are often prevented from exercising it. Disenfranchisement can take many forms, and its manifestations are unfortunately common: purging voter rolls, passing voter-identification requirements, understaffing or closing polling places, gerrymandering voting districts. Under the circumstances, perhaps the best way to celebrate the anniversary of the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment is to remember all those who cannot vote, not only those who can. After all, it is only through our privileged right to vote and to organize that we can keep up with democracy.

In 1919, the Senate passed the Nineteenth Amendment and it was officially ratified on August 26, 1920.

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with their wives, a decree which was mostly ignored in Great Britain. Benedict VIII (1112-1124) added such decree to the Canon Law and justified the selling of the priests' children as slaves. The Synod of Clermont (1130) stated that priests are "God's temples," adding that to lay in the conjugal bed offended their dignity and made them impure. The Second Lateran Council (1139) made celibacy mandatory in the West. The clergymen who resisted were to have their children sold as slaves. Many of these children were, then, sold to members of the clergy. One can see why priestly celibacy is being defended to this day and the trashy arguments used to deny women equal rights in the Church and in society at large.

Furthermore, women were the main targets of the Inquisition, mostly because they were charged with being the major source of witchcraft. So Exodus 22: 18 ("Thou shall not allow a witch to live") was applied to them and they were burned at the stake. That's how the Inquisition ended up, during the 16th and 17th centuries, killing women in the proportion of 50 to every one male. In Central Europe, 83% of its 100,000 victims were women.

Yet, a proper reading of the true meaning of the Old Testament tells a rather different story.

Keep in mind that the male monotheism of ancient Israel grew out as a reaction against its neighbors' worship of the goddesses of fertility that were identified with nature, the earth, the moon, fertility, etc. However, the Old Testament presents God with many feminine traits. His mercy, for instance, is spelled out as "rahamim," a term derived from "rehem," i.e., the woman's uterus. Even Pope John Paul II used the term "rahamim" in reference to God's unbound mercy (encyclical Dives in Misericordia 8: 23-31).

We shall see, in my following article, how a proper reading of all the Old Testament contradicts the androcentrism of ancient Israel, then how the example of Jesus and of the Apostle Paul present a quite different and positive view of women and of their role in Church and society.

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