



This seems so clearly the case with grief, but it can be so only because it was already the case with desire. One does not always stay intact. One may want to, or manage to for a while, but despite one's best efforts, one is undone, in the face of the other, by the touch, by the scent, by the feel, by the prospect of the touch, by the memory of the feel. And so, when we speak about "my sexuality" or "my gender", as we do and as we must, we nevertheless mean something complicated that is partially concealed by our usage. As a mode of relation, neither gender nor sexuality is precisely a possession, but rather, is a mode of being dispossessed, a way of being for another or by virtue of another. It won't even do to say that I am promoting a relational view of the self over an autonomous one or trying to redescribe autonomy in terms of relationality. Despite my affinity for the term relationality, we may need other language to approach the issue that concerns us, a way of thinking about how we are not only constituted by our relations but also dispossessed by them as well.

Judith Butler

Precarious Life:

The Powers of Mourning and Violence

Editorial

In Christian thought, creation expresses the givenness and dependence of all things upon God. That is to say that all created things are a grace. In calling this issue of Mozaik “So God Made” we wanted to begin with this thought about the givenness of humanity as male and female, as gendered, that is to say relational, being. To say that to be human, to be male or female, is given does not mean that any of these things are predefined or that givenness entails a prescriptive idea about how to understand or act out that givenness. The contrary is true; givenness implies the creative discovery of what it means to be human, to be male and female. Indeed, the Genesis narrative can be read as an account of the highs and lows in an exploration of what it means to be male and female. It is a risky business but there is often a freedom and playfulness in the narrative.

Another reason for beginning here is to indicate that when we talk about gender we are not talking about something that is incidental, concerning the issues of the day, or in some way optional. We are talking about something fundamental to what it means to be human; it is in the relationality between male and female that we discover what it means to be human. Where there is violence or injustice in that relationship there is a disfigurement and deprivation of humanity itself.

Often the failure is to see male and female as opposites, as fundamentally different. The challenge is to understand the sameness of male and female, that they are two aspects

of the one humanity. What it means for me to be male depends on and participates in what it means for you to be female. In the end the divisions and differences are illusionary.

The end of this exploration should be the discovery of the goodness, the blessedness or happiness, of what it means to be human, male and female. This happiness comes through the free interplay and expression of humanity as persons grow and express their uniqueness. Gender inequality, division and violence all fall short of this goodness and many yet wait to be redeemed from the pain, fear and disfigurement caused by this reality.

So we need to introduce a second key in Christian thought, this time from Paul’s teaching of salvation. In his letter to the Galatians Paul describes salvation as freedom from the distinctions of the law so that:

As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to the promise. (Galatians 3.27-29)

Here we find that salvation entails the unlearning of the illusionary differences between male and female and the

discovery of men and women in Christ as without difference children of God. There is liberation from what Paul calls the elemental spirits of the world, the external judgements that appear to represent the timeless laws of ‘science’ or ‘morality’ and to which ideas of male and female tend to conform. These judgements support and lead to oppression and the disinheritance of self. These judgements are familiar to us when we talk about what is ‘natural’, ‘good for society’ or ‘ordained by God’.

Salvation means that when I take on Christ, I throw off all these external ideas about what it means for me to be human and approach God as a child, without judgement and find myself accepted as I am. This is not to say that anything goes but that Christians have come of age in Christ and are free to discover again their created goodness, male and female.

I offer these keys as a plea: Let there be more humility, listening and mutual discernment in our discussions about gender and let us nurture our communities as places of freedom, empathy and play as we support one another in living out our shared humanity. Above all let there be grace, let us not submit each other to external judgements but enable each other in the mature exploration of our created goodness. To this end we commend this issue of Mozaik to you and hope that these pages contribute to that goal. As an indication of where we have journeyed from and to where we are destined this issue includes a new feature,



an article from the archives. This time the ‘article from the archives’ is from the newsletter of the Women’s Project.

In this light also it is finally my pleasure to thank Jaanus and his successor as Gender Co-ordinator, Joe Nagle for their contribution to this issue. Above all, I would like to thank and introduce (if you have not yet met her) Jill Piebiak the new Publications and Office Intern. Her work and dedication has made this issue possible and her enthusiasm for Mozaik is fantastic.

That we all may be one!

Andrew Scott

So God Made

- 6 Anastasia GKITSI – *It is Not That We Don't Know, But That We Don't Feel: A Reflection*
- 7 Rhiannon GRANT – *Feminist Christian Language: Enriching and Challenging*
- 11 Maryann PHILBROOK – *Pray for Equality: Perspectives and Prospects Concerning Human Rights & Gender*
- 15 PAPP Vera – *As So Many Cattle: Reflections on the State of Indian Women*
- 20 Erikka CHAPMAN – *Cut Roses and Women Rising: How Gender Equality in Kenya is not only a Kenyan Issue*
- 25 Jooa VUORINEN – *Images of Beauty and Equality: Towards an Open Dialogue on Sexual Orientation*
- 29 Jooa VUORINEN – *A Poem*
- 30 John DELAP – *The Fruit Of Your...Marriage: Respecting Tradition While Widening Participation to Roman Catholic Matrimony*
- 34 Yusra KHREEGI – *That You May Recognise One Another: Introducing Gender Themes in Islam*
- 42 Caroline SMITH – *Towards a New Spirituality: From the Archives*

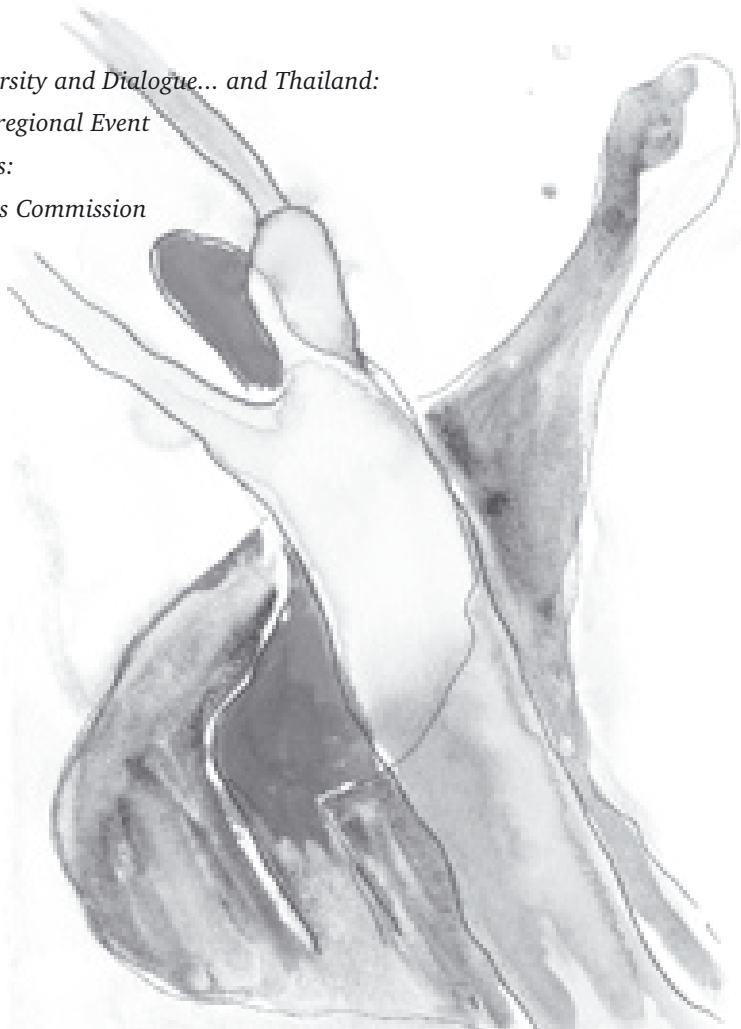


Resources

- 48 Resource – *Christ our Mother: A Meditation at the Foot of the Cross*
- 50 Resource – *Reading in Relation: Introducing Contextual Bible Study*

WSCF in Focus

- 52 Katka BABICOVÁ – *Identity, Diversity and Dialogue... and Thailand: A Reflection from the WSCF Interregional Event*
- 54 Joe NAGEL – *Breaking the Chains: A Reflection on the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women*



It is Not That We Don't Know, But That We Don't Feel: A Reflection



Anastasia Gkitsi

"It is not that we don't know, but that we don't feel", a favorite Irish play-write said aptly, expressing in this most eloquent verse this finding of humanity's abjection in our times; a time when people enjoy or are carried away with a rise in violence, the establishment of anger, fear and danger. A time in which people are afflicted with loneliness, experience existential emptiness, are overcome with the daily emptying of ideals, shrunk in the worst complacency of his egotistic microcosm.

A time when the whole of creation groans with pain from the violence of humanity towards it, its soil soaked with the blood of soldiers killed for nothing, its air suffocating with the questions of those left behind towards the state leaders. We have become a humanity covered in bloodshed, involved in all kinds of wars and conflicts, a humanity whose children get older sooner, passing by or suppressing their childhood innocence. A humanity who succumb to that primeval temptation of the strong overpowering the weak, the victimizers the victims, the successful the helpless and the corrupted those who are humble.

"It is not that we don't know, but that we don't feel", we no longer feel pain, we rather pass it by in a superficial way, just seconds before the new image takes the place of the previous one. We no longer feel the need unless it invades our privacy, which is overfilled with dull desires and moments, deadening what is really worth and ours. We no longer feel the excitement that motivates our efforts, that shakes off our complacency and gets us uncomfortable with

our desired or imposed stupefaction. We no longer feel, yet we still know, see, hear what's going on around us.

Thank God for the poets, who always rescue some fragment of compassion for all the unlucky ones. Thank God for the poets, who yearn for the beauty and sensitivity that redefine our human capacity. Thank God for the poets, who call upon us to sympathize with our fellow human being even though he may be miles away in another country, because they know well that "in every life there is always something deeper than life itself; it is the life of others".

Volos, March 2009



Feminist Christian Language: Enriching and Challenging

Rhiannon Grant

The problem of naming God

Working out the correct form of address for an all-powerful, immanent, transcendent, benevolent being who somehow managed to create the world is never going to be easy. I have a hard enough time working out when it's appropriate to start calling my lecturers by their first names! Over the centuries, Christians have experimented to a certain extent, usually guided by terms they find in the Bible and the work of previous generations – Jesus followed Jeremiah and Malachi in calling God 'Father', the terms 'Lord' and 'King' are common in the Hebrew Bible, and most of the Christian world has continued with that language.

Brian Wren analysed a modern hymn book and found over a thousand different names for God, with a particular diversity of names for the Second Person of the Trinity (the Son). However, when you take them together, a pattern begins to show: in order from most common to least, here are ten words used to name God: Lord, King, Saviour, Father, Love, Lamb, Almighty, Light, Shepherd, Maker. Of those, four are genderless at least to the extent that they do not have an alternative feminine form. His other notable finding was that in 1423 places where a pronoun was used to describe God, 1422 were masculine (he/him/his) and one neutral (it/its). None were feminine.

At this point, you might be asking yourself

why I'm pointing this out. Of course those are the words hymn writers use – didn't you just show us that they come from Scripture? "God is Lord", you might be saying, "and King, and our Saviour, and Father to us".

On the other hand, I imagine that some readers might be saying, "I thought so". Some of you might even have counted pronouns for yourselves, or noticed in a service once that the words seemed jarring – either because they leave half the population out of the metaphors, or because so many of them seem to relate to situations of unequal power. Perhaps you began to notice when you went to a service which broke the pattern: where the Holy Spirit was called She, for example, or where God was named as Mother. It's not uncommon for people who have had difficult relationships with their fathers to feel rejected by the Church when God-our-Father language is all-pervasive, and in today's world, Lord and King may simply be dry, or give unhelpful images of power-hungry men.

A lot of people, especially but not only women, are very glad to see new language for God coming into use. Some have left their churches seeking new patterns of worship, and joined the Goddess Movement or related communities because they found that the God who is Lord and King and Father could not speak to them – Mary Daly's work, (which has since been critiqued: for a sample of such discussion, see Pui-Lan 2002) offered a way of understanding the feeling of alienation sometimes experienced in such situations, and she and other feminists enabled women to form groups who embraced new forms



Rhiannon Grant is presently studying for an MA in Gender, Sexuality, and Queer Theory at the University of Leeds, having previously studied Philosophy and Theology at the University of Nottingham. She is a member of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), but finds herself attending a variety of other worship services on occasion. Her interest in women and religion has deep roots, but became obvious last year when she wrote an undergraduate dissertation on the history of Jewish feminism. She is now working on her MA dissertation, which deals with the theological and ethical problems raised by Christian and Jewish feminists in the global north and west who borrow language and practices from other religious traditions.



of Christianity or spirituality. In those groups, worship of a Goddess – or more than one – is common, and can affirm women’s experience as relevant to their religious beliefs.

How do we test new names for God?

In choosing terms to use in our worship, we might have lots of concerns, but the key ones are usually that we try and speak the truth about God as best we understand it, and that in speaking about such a complex topic we try to use metaphors and images to which people can relate. The first one is perhaps the most difficult to judge: coming from a Quaker perspective which values experience over all else, I would say that it had to be closely bound with the second. Experience of God, which is open to all, thus informs the choices we make about naming God. If you have another priority, that might change your answers, I leave that for you to consider.

The second concern is difficult to generalise to a whole congregation because words tend to mean different things to different people, but we can at least gather some guidelines and even facts. I start by looking to the example

Jesus sets: in teaching, he uses stories of things familiar to his audience – although techniques of sheep farming and orchard maintenance in use at the time may not be so familiar to many of us now. Furthermore, he also had a mission to speak to those who were excluded from mainstream society. Tax collectors and sinners, anybody? (See Matthew 9:9-13.) I take it, then, that we should use language accessible to all and seek to speak to those who might otherwise be excluded.

How can we make language accessible? We need to consider the effect it has on those who hear it: are they likely to understand it? Will it make them feel safe, joyous, repentant, guilty, awed? Is it fresh, offering new insights, or a tired, old repetition which has lost all meaning? Is it well-loved and familiar, or a jarringly strange term used purely for novelty value?

Implications of specific examples

In this respect, I want to consider especially the effect that new terms for God might have for a congregation. Here are four examples of ways of naming God which differ from the Lord-King-Father standards discussed above. They are all drawn from Christian feminist writing (see ‘further’).

From ‘Easter Creed’, by Nicola Slee:

We believe in God
Maker, Redeemer and Sustainer of Life,
without beginning or end,
whose life-giving love was let loose on the first Easter Sunday
and whose life-giving love we share and proclaim here today
to all women and men, wherever and whoever they are,

A lot of people, especially but not only women, are very glad to see new language for God coming into use.

loved, blessed and called by God,
without beginning or end.

From ‘A Halloween Service: Celebrating Sophia in our Older Wise Women’, by Janet R. Walton:

ALL (*chanting four times*):

She changes everything she touches;
everything she touches, changes.

Then begins the remembering of a wider circle of women’s wisdom in the form of a litany. These words and others are called out by DIFFERENT VOICES:

VOICES (*calling out from different places in the space*):

Gossip, Spinster, Crone, Witch, Maker, Mother, Cook, Healer, Midwife, Sister, Judge, Prophet, Pilgrim, Peace-maker...

From *In Her Own Rite*, by Marjorie Proctor-Smith:

A valuable resource for enlarging our imaginations about God-language is to be found in the varied and rich traditions of Goddess-worship... for example, existing traditions such as the Yoruba celebrate Oshun the Dancer, and Yemaya of the seas...

From ‘Who Is She?’, by Brian Wren:

Who is She,
neither male nor female,
maker of all things,
only glimpsed or hinted,
source of life and gender?
She is God,
mother, sister, lover:
in her love we wake,
move and grow, are daunted,
triumph and surrender.

In Nicola Slee’s version of a Creed (of which only the last stanza is given here), we see some simple changes to the language which preserve much traditional theology: for example, although the Persons of the Trinity are named in ungendered language, it remains clear that it is the Persons of the Trinity who are being named. Some of Slee’s poetry is more radical than this, but the point here is that neutral language need not adjust theology, nor deny belief in basic Christian tenets – here, the centrality and reality of the Resurrection. These familiar ideas are simply expressed in new ways, which seems likely to be acceptable to a wide range of Christians.

The next selection is from a liturgy celebrating an event which, although it does have a place in the standard Christian calendar, as All Soul’s Day, is not usually linked to women or to wisdom. Walton takes her inspiration from Celtic, presumed to be pre-Christian, legend, and uses Sophia “the transliteration of the Greek word for wisdom” as a proper name for God or part of God – I think she has the Holy Spirit in mind, although this is not explicit (Walton 74/2000). She does acknowledge that the chant she uses was written by Starhawk, who describes herself on her website as “a Pagan and Witch” (<http://www.starhawk.org>). Does that have an impact on our reading of it? At face value, the claim it makes – which I take to be that the presence of God in our lives will be transforming – is not that strange to a Christian context. However, knowing that it was written to address a non-Christian Goddess, we might also want to ask whether it still addresses the same God Christians are trying to name. Personally, I find the chant beautiful, powerful, and theologically acceptable, but I hold a very universalist conception of God – again, if you have other priorities in such matters, your conclusions may vary.

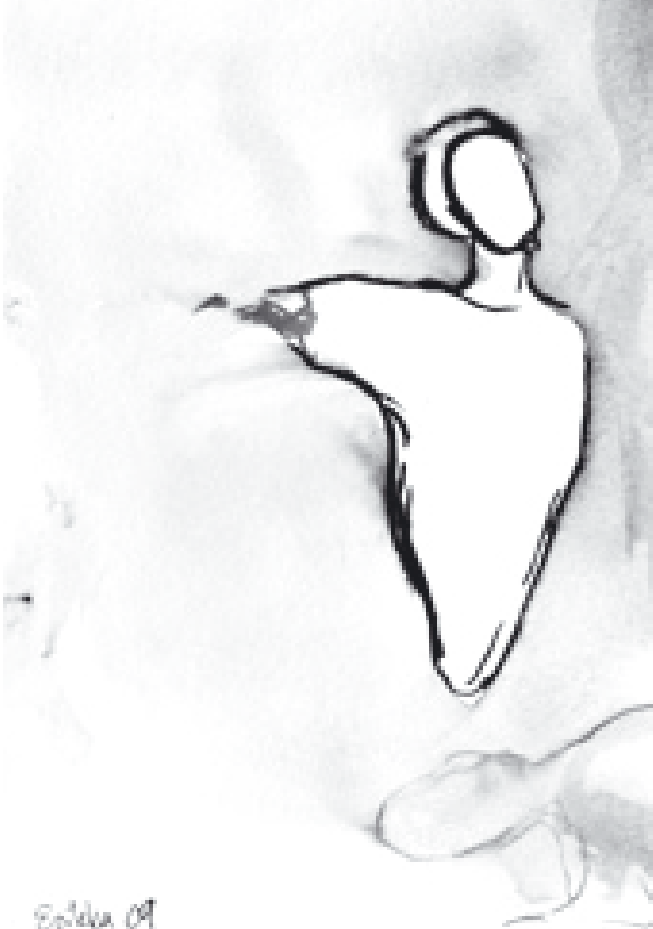
Thirdly, we have a passage from Marjorie Proctor-Smith’s book about writing feminist Christian liturgy.

I worry that the historical precedents make it impossible to free the action from its ethical implications.

Again, it is suggested that in Christian worship we use names for God which come from non-Christian sources. These are held to offer the potential of richer imagery for God. This time, however, I am more disturbed. I still see that some Christians will struggle with the theology of the words, but I also have an ethical concern: if white Christians in Europe and the United States take language and images from African nations – in this case the Yoruba – are we repeating a pattern of theft, not to mention cultural and actual harm, which dates back to the slave trade or before? However much respect we try to have (I write here as just such a white feminist), I worry that the historical precedents make it impossible to free the action from its ethical implications. For this reason, I urge caution in this area – we have enough to explore in other areas that there is no need to rush into this.

As a final sample, I have given the first stanza from a hymn by Brian Wren, a male writer who is explicitly responding to feminist concerns, which goes much further in naming God as feminine without seeing the need to borrow from other religious traditions. I particularly like it because it brings together the advantages of all the previous examples: it gives vivid images of a God who is not the distant and dull old-man-on-a-cloud, it asserts that God’s presence can make a difference in our lives, and it retains traditional theology (in this case, that God created the world).

Naming God remains difficult – I hope that it will never come to seem too easy, because a lack of struggle might mean a lack of thought – but we can envisage fresh and relevant ways of speaking about God which do not require us to give up our theology or to use without permission material from oppressed communities. Perhaps you could consider a new way of naming God in your private prayer, church, or worship group?



Further Reading

M. Proctor-Smith, *In Her Own Rite: Constructing Feminist Liturgical Tradition* (2nd ed., Ohio: OSL Publications, 2000).

K. Pui-Lan ‘Unbinding our Feet: saving brown women and feminist religious discourse’. (In Laura E. Donaldson and Kwok Pui-lan (eds): *Postcolonialism, Feminism and Religious Discourse*. New York and London: Routledge. 2002.)

N. Slee, *Praying Like A Woman* (London: SPCK, 2004).

J.R. Walton, *Feminist Liturgy: A Matter of Justice* (Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 2000).

B. Wren, *What Language Shall I Borrow: God-Talk in Worship: A Male Response to Feminist Theology*, (London: SCM Press, 1989).

Pray for Equality: Perspectives on human rights & gender

Maryann Philbrook

Pray for Equality. This phrase from the workshop on Human Rights and Gender has stayed with me since the WSCF Europe Regional Conference in October 2009 in Sibiu, Romania.

As a staff member of the WSCF Global Office in Geneva, I went to the conference to represent the Inter-regional perspective as well as to learn what students in Europe were doing and were passionate about. At the time I was the Communications Intern with WSCF. I had never been to Romania, or a WSCF conference before.

WSCF Global Advocacy

When I was asked to lead the workshop I was not sure exactly what to do, the topic of Human Rights and Gender is *very* broad. After discussing with other staff, we realised that this workshop was a perfect tie-in to the work WSCF was already doing at the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (CSW). This is a yearly event in New York where people from around the world get together to talk about, document and plan around gender issues.

WSCF has been partnering with the World Council of Churches and Ecumenical Women for the past three years to bring an ecumenical, international, inter-generational delegation to the CSW. In 2009, Ms. Christine Housel, the global project manager for WSCF said, “WSCF’s participants have made a significant contribution on a number of different fronts in the past few months. This is also an important part of our

leadership training”. Students are learning about global advocacy by doing. In 2009, WSCF participated with a diverse delegation including both men and women from around the world. This year’s CSW takes place from March 1-12.

2010 is the 15th anniversary of the CSW held in Beijing, where a platform of actions was laid out that are still being implemented today. This anniversary is an opportunity to assess the real changes that have been made in the past 15 years and the real problems that still need to be addressed. WSCF is making sure that a student, Christian voice is heard in this discussion.

Organising a Workshop

This workshop presented a perfect opportunity to talk to students in Europe about the work already being done on a global level and to hear from them about their experiences. In exploring this topic I decided to talk about what students know best, their own lives. We could have talked about the human rights abuses related to gender in Africa or China or even in Europe – but those do not necessarily directly affect us.

Students are affected by the way their universities address gender and by their written or unwritten rules regarding equality. I thus decided to lead a “World Café” discussion about the students’ experiences in their university regarding gender and equal rights. World Café is a well known facilitation technique in which a small group of 4-7 people discuss five questions, moving from table to table between questions in order to create unique groups for each discussion.



Maryann Philbrook is originally from Louisiana in the United States, but currently lives in Austin, TX. She worked for the World Student Christian Federation in Geneva, Switzerland as the Communications Intern in 2009. Maryann started blogging in 2003, but has really picked up the pace since she started working for WSCF in 2009, with her blog (www.maryanninegeneva.blogspot.com) about her experiences in Geneva. Maryann graduated in 2006 from Occidental College in Los Angeles, where she received a bachelor’s degree in Politics. After graduating from University she was a Beatitudes Society Fellow, an Episcopal Urban Intern and an English Language Assistant in France. Aside from being passionate about the French language, Maryann’s heart goes out to reconciliation among different strands of Christianity so that a more just world can be created.

Ecumenical Women, one of WSCF's partner organizations at the CSW, was collecting information from all around the world to use in the 2010 CSW to ensure that all viewpoints were heard. Since I wanted to gather information as well as raise awareness the World Café platform was the most logical choice in this setting. This type of workshop allows participants to exchange information with each other as well as learning from their diverse experiences.

The Workshop

In our discussion there were four questions and during the final discussion the students were asked to list three ideas they took away from the discussions. The questions were:

- What ways do you think your gender has affected your university life?
- What are institutional or systemic barriers women face at your University?
- How does your faith inform your understanding or approach to these barriers?
- What can we do to change this?

Each group was given a large sheet of paper to write on during the discussions. Sometimes they wrote “answers”, sometimes they drew pictures, sometimes they did not write a thing.

These “answers” are the physical responses, and I still have them today. I took photos of all the pages and then used them to answer a questionnaire for one of our partner organisations about the CSW. Therefore all the input from the conference will go into a larger pool of knowledge that will inform advocacy in the upcoming CSW. Perhaps our advocacy will inform next year's results from the CSW and then we can change global policy. The results from one workshop can have impact.

Insights and Results

From the results, I gathered five key insights. Most people's complaints were not in the written rules of universities, they were more informal. The first insight was that:

Most professors in the university are men. There are few examples of women being successful academics.

Young girls need successful women to look up to. In an article in January 2010, it was reported that in the Netherlands less than 12% of full time faculty are women.¹ We need more women teaching at the University level. These role models are important because they help us to see what is possible.

The second learning was that:

Expectations of women and men are different; women are expected to take care of the family. This becomes a problem as studies are often during the same age range when women are having children.

The expectation is not written in stone, yet the informal nature of it is still just as restrictive. Women are seen as less capable because they pause their professional development to have children. There is not a simple solution to this issue. This is revealed by the fact that the *majority* of undergraduate students are women, yet they are by far the *minority* in doctoral programmes and as full professors. In Sweden, 60% of undergraduates are women, while only 45% of women complete a doctorate.² Women are hitting a glass

¹ J.P. Myklebust, 'The Netherlands: Too few women are professors', *University World News*, (17 Jan 2010), <http://www.universityworldnews.com/article.php?story=20100114190806289>

² Anamaria Dutceac Segesten, 'Gender (in)equality in higher education: Sweden,



ceiling sometime after they complete their undergraduate degree but before they go on to complete a doctorate and become a professor.

The third topic that came up repeatedly during this workshop was that:

Assertive women are seen as being bitchy, or fighting.

Women are not given equal ground with men to assert their own interest. Women are perhaps passed over in professional careers because what is acceptable behaviour for a man is seen as being “bitchy” when a woman does it. Again, this very intangible understanding has tangible effects. Joan Baez, an American folk singer from the 70s and 80s said this in the *Los Angeles Times* in 1974: “Instead of getting hard ourselves and trying to compete, women should try and give their best qualities to men – bring

them softness, teach them how to cry.”³ Women's fight for equality is not about being better men than men, but instead about empowering women and changing society so that's women's qualities are valued.

Fourthly, it became very clear that:

Empowering women is important, but we want to do that without disempowering men.

The fight for equality cannot be, and should not be, about empowering women by taking that power from men. Many men are threatened by the equality movement because they believe that if women are offered power they will have to give something up – that they will be forced into subservient positions. Yet, we know that this does not have to be the case. The new trend in feminism is “positive masculinity”. The World Council of Churches is approaching violence against women by addressing the men that are often the perpetrators of this violence. Dr. Fulata Mbano-

Europe (and beyond?)', *University of Venus*, (3 Feb 2010), <http://uvenus.wordpress.com/2010/03/02/gender-inequality-in-higher-education-sweden-europe-and-beyond/>

³ <http://www.quoteagarden.com/feminism.html>



Finally, many people mentioned that:

Language is important. We should learn to use more inclusive language ourselves and raise awareness about gender equality.

Although changing language can seem tedious, it is actually very important to creating long term change in society. As we use more inclusive language others will too and ideas will begin to shift. Although changing language is not the answer, it is part of the solution. A small, but meaningful example in English is the fact that most women are now referred to as Ms., instead of Mrs. or Miss; Ms. does not denote their marital status.⁵

Although these conclusions may seem banal to some of us who have studied gender theory or are actively fighting for women's rights – these were the conclusions that a group of 30 young European men and women came up with over the course of an hour or so. It is incredible the amount of depth and thought that was shown in such a short period of time.

The results from one workshop provide a start to create change. In fact, the whole conference was a beginning, a model, for how constructive dialogue can take place.

I have never been to a conference with so many diverse opinions, where everyone was taken seriously and given the opportunity and respect to share. I have never experienced such an open and loving platform where people can honestly share their views and be respected. This type of discussion is the beginning of real change and a way forward. WSCF will continue to pray for equality, by having such open forums. Yes, this phrase will continue to resound in me: pray for equality.

⁵ Jess McCabe 'Feminist Language in France', *The F Word: Contemporary UK Feminism*, (25 January 2010), http://www.thefword.org.uk/blog/2010/01/feminist_language

Moyo, who is the Programme Executive for women in Church and Society at the World Council of Churches, believes that "together with men who are in the process of becoming gender equitable, we can make the difference."⁴

⁴ <http://www.overcomingviolence.org/en/resources/campaigns/women-against-violence/week-5-a-story-from-south-africa/reflection.html>

As So Many Cattle: Reflections on the State of Indian Women

Papp Vera

Have you ever given thought to what benefits you enjoy in life? You have your family, home, clothes, food, a decent education, and the possibility to travel and experience other cultures, and so on. Moreover you can choose your partner, you decide who you want to marry and when. Quite natural, isn't it? Yes, it's quite natural in Europe. But what about the other parts of the world?

Last summer, I spent one month in India and I worked for some local NGOs who are engaged in helping poor people. I would like to briefly describe state of Indian women so as to allow you to imagine the social state of the Indian girls who I worked with.

The complex socioeconomic problem I am writing about starts at the time of pregnancy. Is it going to be a girl or a boy? Most Indian people want boys. Desire for a male child manifests so blatantly that parents have no remorse about repeated, closely spaced pregnancies, premature deaths and even terminating a child before it is born. Advances in technology and diagnostic facilities have opened up new avenues for those who hate girls and have led to serious disturbances in sex ratio as a result of female foeticide. Sex ratio, a social indicator measuring the extent of prevailing equity between males and females in society, is defined as the number of females per 1000 males. Changes in sex ratio reflect underlying socioeconomic and cultural patterns of a society. India's 2001 census showed a sex

ratio in India of 933/1000 males, which is the lowest ratio among the world's ten most populous countries and highlights a significant trend against women.^{1,2}

In India (and in many other parts of the world, e.g. Egypt, Afghanistan, Bangladesh)³, birth of a female child is perceived as a curse with economic and social liability, but why? One problem is the dowry system. Many reasons are put forward for explaining this practice. It is said that a dowry is meant to help the newly-weds set up their own home or that a dowry is given as compensation to the groom's parents for the amount they have spent in educating and raising their son. It is also said that the point of the dowry system is to provide for the bride should something unfortunate occur with her husband such as death or divorce.⁴ Dowry is a major reason for parents to resent a daughter at birth and moreover they think it is pointless to spend so much on a girl's education and upbringing only for her to leave to another home, without repayment. As you can probably imagine, daughters can be extremely expensive offspring. Parents have to make a mad scramble to get enough wealth and material goods together to see their daughter



Papp Vera was born in Hungary and has been studying medicine at the University of Szeged where she will graduate in 2011. She wants to be an infectologist and work as a missionary doctor in third world countries. She is a leader of the „Homeless Team“ group at the Catholic University Parish of Szeged, which gives physical and social care to homeless people in the town. Vera has been member of the Hungarian SCM since 2006.

¹ Missing female births in India Shirish S Sheth *The Lancet*, Volume 367, Issue 9506, 21 January 2006-27 January 2006, pp. 185-186

² Low male-to-female sex ratio of children born in India: national survey of 1.1 million households

P. Jha, R. Kumar, P. Vasa, N. Dhingra, D. Thiruchelvam, R. Moineddin *The Lancet*, Volume 367, Issue 9506, pp. 211-218

³ A Turning Point in Gender Bias in Mortality? An Update on the Number of Missing Women Stephan Klasen and Claudia Wink *Population and Development Review*, Vol. 28, No. 2 (Jun., 2002), pp. 285-312

⁴ Bridegroom Price in Urban India: Class, Caste and „Dowry Evil“ Among Christians in Madras Lionel Caplan *Man*, New Series, Vol. 19, No. 2 (Jun., 1984), pp. 216-233



well taken care of by the time she is of marriageable age. In Northern India today, this age can vary from 18-25 though exceptions do apply depending on socio-economic factors.⁵

While the dowry system is still in place, it has become more of a “bride-price” system. The parents of a baby girl must come up with a respectable dowry. The term respectable is

⁵ The dowry system in Northern India: Women’s attitudes and social change Padma Srinivasan *Journal of Marriage and Family* Volume 66 Issue 5, pp. 1108 - 1117

arbitrary, respectable dowry can be anything from \$50 worth of material goods to \$50,000 or more worth of material goods depending on the family’s standing in society. If a good dowry is not made, the girl is unlikely to have a “good” match. This again, is mostly arbitrary. A good match for a very poor family might be marriage of their daughter into a slightly better financed family or a good match for a middle income family might be finding a husband that is a doctor or engineer. As you might have guessed, there are very few brides who actually retain their dowry after marriage.

While India is very modernized in some aspects (i.e. they lead the world in student’s math and science scores) they still keep to the tradition of arranged marriages. “Love marriages” do happen in India as well but it is not the norm. It is an accepted fact that a person’s family will play a role in picking the marriage partner. It is important to remember that in Indian society an arranged marriage is seen as an act of love. Since marriage is one of the most important decisions a person will ever make and because divorce is not accepted among most Indians, it is imperative that the marriage choice is carefully thought out and planned. How can a young person make such an important decision on his/her own? Instead, the family (usually the parents) look for certain traits in a marriage partner. Some desirable traits they look for in both male and female are: matching levels of education, matching cultures, close parental cities, matching religions, and matching dietary practices just to name a few. Potential bride-grooms come under close scrutiny

“Love marriages” do happen in India as well but it is not the norm. It is an accepted fact that a person’s family will play a role in picking the marriage partner.

in several areas of the matching process – and vice-versa. Often, this turns into an interview process where photos are provided of the son/daughter in question along with bio-data about his/her life and family. If that is met with approval, arrangements will be made for the parents to meet the son/daughter and their family. Traditionally, however, the bride and groom would not even see each other until the day of their wedding.⁶

Today, while most marriages are still arranged, times are changing. There is usually a small courtship period where the bride and groom can meet and talk under the careful watch of a guardian. Also, if either one of the two do not want the marriage, it is likely to be cancelled. Of course, with any society, you have those people who just will not adapt and change. There are places in India where time has not moved forward. For those people, they carry on their lives as their parents have and their grandparents before them. Shockingly, there are still some forced marriages and child brides.

The most common form of use of the dowry is not meant to be dishonourable and is far more practical for many families. More often than not, the bride’s dowry gets absorbed into the household for the greater good of the entire family. Perhaps a bride’s dowry may help provide food for the entire family over a lifetime, or allow the purchase of a refrigerator. For many families, they do not see anything wrong in this sort of dowry absorption simply because it aids the bride as well. Furthermore, if the groom’s family is better due to the dowry, the bride will enjoy a better life than perhaps her own mother did.

Of course, there is always a dark side. There are those families who will use the bride’s dowry as their own. Often in these situations, the bride’s dowry will be recycled for the groom’s sisters’ dowry. Sometimes, the groom’s family

uses the bride’s dowry entirely for their own means and the bride does not benefit from it at all. Often women do not even have a room of their own. There have been horrible, true stories of the groom’s family agreeing to one dowry and after the bride is married (and no longer a virgin) demanding more from the bride’s parents. Threats of divorce are often used to entice the bride’s parents to give more dowry. In a country where shame is brought down on the divorcee, parents of the bride will do whatever they can to save their daughters this shame. Occasionally, the threat of physical violence is used. Right from Aristotle to our day, women are treated as so many cattle are. There really is no way such situations can end happily. Even if the bride’s parents are able to scrape together more dowry, they will not be able to continue doing so and in the end the bride is either sent home in shame or sometimes killed in an “accident”.⁷

Another shocking example of the violation of women’s rights is the practice of child marriage.⁸ According to studies, the practice comes from a time when invaders raped unmarried Hindu girls.⁹ This forced Hindu communities to marry the girls at a young age to protect them. Now it has become a superstition, and illiteracy adds fuel to the superstition. There is a general myth that if a girl reaches puberty without having been married, she will fall prey to sexual depredations. There is another common superstition that after having sex with a virgin girl a man may be cured from diseases such as syphilis, gonorrhoea and other sexually transmitted diseases, including AIDS.

⁷ Kitchen accidents vis-a-vis dowry deaths B.Sharma *Burns*, Volume 28, Issue 3, May 2002, pp. 250-253

⁸ Child Marriage in India Raj Coomarr Roy *The North American Review*, Vol. 147, No. 383 (Oct., 1888), pp. 415-423

⁹ Chapter 6 by Geeta Chowdhry – in *Women, states, and nationalism: at home in the nation?* Edited by Sita Ranchod-Nilsson, Mary Ann Tétreault 2000 Routledge pp. 105-109

⁶ Arranging a marriage in India S Nanda *The Naked Anthropologist*, 1992



this practice. Throughout the world, the problem of early, forced marriages of children is considered to be a violation of basic human rights. Yet it has been estimated that 49 countries have a significant child bride problem.

In the rural villages of India many young girls are rarely allowed out of their homes unless it is to work in the fields or to marry. These uneducated girls are often married off at the young age of 11. Some families allow girls who are only 7 years old to marry. In rural areas it is very unusual for a girl to reach the age of 16 and not be married.

Poor health, early death, and lack of educational opportunities lead the list of problems attributed to child marriage.

- Child brides have a double pregnancy death rate of women in their 20s.
- In developing countries, the leading cause of death for young girls between the ages of 15 and 19 is early pregnancy. Additionally, child brides are at an extremely high risk for fistulas (vaginal and anal ruptures), from having babies at such a young age.
- The babies of child brides are sicker and weaker and many do not survive childhood.
- Child brides have a higher risk of being infected with sexually transmitted diseases. They are also at an increased risk of chronic anaemia and obesity.
- Child brides have poor access to contraception.
- These young girls have a lack of educational opportunities.
- Being forced into an early marriage creates a lifetime of poverty.¹⁰

¹⁰ Prevalence of child marriage and its effect on fertility and fertility-control outcomes of young women in India: a cross-sectional, observational study Anita Raj, Niranjana Saggurti, Donta Balaiah and Jay G Silverman *The Lancet* Volume 373, Issue 9678, 30 May 2009-5 June 2009, pp. 1883-1889

A woman's education is determined by men, whether she should study, what she will study or banning study all together.

Statistically, child brides have a higher risk of becoming a victim of domestic violence, sexual abuse, and murder.

Education is the most important key to helping end the practice of forced child marriages. Many believe that education may prove to be more successful in preventing child marriages than banning child marriages.¹¹

- Education of the parents is just as important as education of the children. Education will broaden their horizons and will help convince parents of the benefits in having their children educated.¹²
- It is important to provide education involving more than reading, writing, and math. Teaching these young girls life skills, including reproduction and contraception information, how to have fun and how to play sports, is proving to be a positive way to change the lives and futures of these adolescent girls.
- By providing more educational opportunities, India has been able to cut child marriage rates by up to two-thirds. Girls who are able to complete primary school tend to marry later and have fewer children.

A lot more needs to be done in the field of women's education in India. The gap in the male-female literacy rate is just a simple indicator. While the male literary rate is more than 75% according to the 2001 census, the female literacy rate is just 54.16%.¹³ Prevailing prejudices, low enrolment of girl children in schools, engagement of girl children in domestic work and a high dropout rate are major obstacles in the path of educating all Indian women.

Male dominance is present in every aspect of the Indian life. Male dominance controls everything feminine. In

marriage, it depends on the man what a girl will wear, where she will go, and how she will express herself in love. A woman's education is determined by men, whether she should study, what she will study or banning study all together. In fact, males control what she will think or rather, what she will not. Gender biases run deep. If women fight publicly on the street they are termed crazy or plain rude. But when a guy fights another guy, they are termed macho. This line of thinking effectively prevents women from fighting back.

For Action

If you want to help Indian women please have a look at the homepages of the NGOs below and make donations so that they can continue their mission.

- Udayan Care (www.udayancare.org): maintains foster homes for children, who are abandoned or orphaned and do not have natural families. Through their homes they promote family 'bonding', physical and mental health and social integration of these children, who were otherwise abused, physically as well as mentally. I worked in one of their homes called Udayan Ghar, where 13 girls live together with one caretaker.
- Udyam Prayas (www.udyamprayas.org): formed 10 years ago under a tree in slums near Safdargunj Hospital, Delhi. The school after a decade of challenges presently operates from the founder's residence. They have nearly 60 children who are first generation learners, from lower strata of society trying to turn their life around.

¹¹ Moving beyond the mother-child dyad: Women's education, child immunization, and the importance of context in rural India Sangeeta Parashar *Social Science & Medicine* Volume 61, Issue 5, September 2005, Pages 989-1000

¹² Market Opportunities, Genetic Endowments, and Intrafamily Resource Distribution: Child Survival in Rural India, Mark R. Rosenzweig and T. Paul Schultz *The American Economic Review*, Vol. 72, No. 4 (Sep., 1982), pp. 803-815

¹³ Women's Education in India: <http://www.indiaedu.com/education-india/women-edu.html>

Cut Roses and Women Rising: How Gender Equality in Kenya is **not only a Kenyan** Issue



Erikka Chapman

What does buying a bunch of roses in a local supermarket have to do with gender equality in Kenya? The history of women's liberation stretches from the colonization of a country to the organisation of local women fighting for the right to their own body, and better labouring conditions.

“What we are fighting is a balance of power”, says Kamanda Mucheke who has worked for many years at the Kenyan National Commission for Human Rights, (KNCHR). “In all positions of power there are men, men, men.”

The position of women in Kenyan society is changing. It is a slow process, showing how the feminist struggle ranges from the structures of poverty to the labouring conditions and finally to the very skin that forms the female body.

It was the insight that his sisters and fellow citizens were lacking the freedom Mucheke had, that prompted him to complete his work in marketing research and devote his time to work for human rights. “The woman's place was the kitchen, the garden and the bed. Period.”

Kamanda Mucheke wants gender equality and has risked his life to fight for it.

Poverty the core issue

The equality Mucheke fights for goes deeper than just wanting equal positions for men and women. He points out that there are structural problems that force a huge part of the Kenyan population to live beneath the poverty line. “The national

wealth of the country is in the hands of very few people”, says Mucheke.

He also speaks of the land problem that should have been solved when Kenya became an independent state in 1963. The land claimed by the British when they colonized Kenya in 1895 was not returned to the people, but rather it was sold, and since the wages that Kenyans received from the British were low, or nonexistent, few had money to buy any of their land back. Since 1963, the number of landless people has increased, and a huge part of the population lives in slum areas with no access to water, electricity or infrastructure.

Mucheke explains that the poverty is a time bomb that explodes in the kind of violence which was seen following the 2007 elections. Shootings and disappearings were blamed on criminal gangs, but evidence presented by the UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial executions, Philip Alston, has shown that the police and politicians were responsible¹. Mucheke knows that because of his work with the KNCHR, to uncover these violations against human rights, his life is in danger. Since the release of the KNCHR and the UN reports, two of his colleagues have been assassinated.

Poverty and the problems it produces, such as criminal gangs, has have a profound impact on women and Gender issues, as they are low on the priority list of the government.

Becoming a good woman

Fighting against torture is an important issue for Kamanda Mucheke and other Human Rights Commissioners. One of the most widespread forms of torture against women is the practice of female genital mutilation (FGM). The World Health Organisation defines FGM as all forms of injuring or cutting the external female genitals for nontherapeutic reasons. Depending on how much tissue is removed the procedure can be classified into three different types; the third and most severe type includes excision of all external genitals, and a narrowing of the vaginal opening, leaving only a small hole for menstrual blood and urination. This procedure is often done under poor hygienic conditions and without anaesthesia. According to Mucheke, the ritual is a cultural not a religious and is practiced by both Muslims and Christians alike. Further, he explains that the procedure varies from community to community and some communities do not practice it at all. For those communities that do, it is a rite of passage into adulthood. It is by many practitioners considered important for becoming a good woman and many young women feel that it is a necessary part of coming of age.

“If you aren't circumcised you lose your friends”, says Mucheke. Peer pressure plays a significant role and following the ritual comes the expectation to get married. After circumcision, a girl is considered a woman, which can often mean that girls at age twelve leave school to be married.

FGM has been banned through the 'The Children Act' 2001² and the 'Sexual Offences Act'³ 2006, and parents and practitioners can be brought to court. The main way of stopping the practice though, is by informing people of the physical dangers of FGM and its violation of the human rights. “We need the grass root organisations to take the law from Nairobi out to the grass root level,” says Mucheke.

One strategy Mucheke mentions, is replacing the rite of

circumcision with alternative rites of passing into adulthood. This is described in a report by Jane Njeri Chege, Ian Askew and Jennifer Liku from the FRONTIERS program, who have studied these methods in Watch.⁴ Instead of knives, songs and dances are used – and career advice and information on sexual health are given. Girls are invited to a gathering with teachers, counsellor, sexual education experts, career experts, pastors or Muslim leaders and human rights experts, for one or several weeks. Here they also meet circumcisers who have now denounced the practice and work to inform others.

The authors of the report on alternative rites conclude that when parents and relatives are informed and included in the process these rites can be an effective way of stopping the practice of FGM. It is a balance maintaining the traditional rite of becoming a woman, while at the same time empowering women. The traditional role of a woman does not allow full freedom to one's own body and life.

The report also shows that alternative rites are not perceived positively by supporters of FGM, and in some places have caused circumcisions to be done at earlier ages. Changing people's attitudes does not happen through one strategy alone.

“I go to radio shows every other day”, says Mucheke. Radio is a cheap way of running media campaigns raising awareness on this issue. It reaches many as it is affordable even in poor areas. Newspapers and TV are other ways of spreading information.

'Blood roses'

The work of the Human Rights Commissioners is versatile and Mucheke has many stories to tell relating to the uncovering of offences against human rights. Supporting human rights includes supporting worker's rights, which

Erikka Chapman's time is spent studying gardening and food production at SLU Alnarp (Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences) and besides that, painting, writing, drinking massive amounts of tea and being part of the Swedish SCM board. She shares a house with her husband and three musicians, and together they create music cafés in their living room and plant vegetables in the garden. Erikka doesn't believe in definite answers, but finds herself guided by feminism, Christianity, permaculture, a love for nature and a trust that what comes to her is from God.



sometimes has meant breaking into the greenhouses of multinational plant producing companies.

On paper, large companies have strict policies regarding working conditions for their employees, but the question remains to what degree these are being followed. According to Kamanda Mucheke, investigators are not allowed into the plant producer's greenhouses. The reason is said to be the risk of contaminating the plants with diseases; a problem that in other places is solved by special clothes for visitors. "They tried to stop us with guards and big dogs, but we said: The only way to stop us is to shoot us before we reach the door."

Inside the greenhouse Mucheke and his colleagues visited, they met women who had become sterile from the chemicals they were exposed to. They told of long shifts, up to 48 hours, and low wages that forced them into a position of dependency. If they became pregnant they lost their job. Many also reported that they had been sexually abused by employers and work leaders. Mucheke refers to the cut roses from these farms as 'blood roses'.

The situation for women workers in Kenya is not only a local issue. There is also a lot of outside pressure from European countries for Kenyan producers to deliver high quality roses for a low price. However, many of these consumers do not know in what conditions the products have been produced in, and when asking multinational companies the answer most often refers to their policies.

A Swedish wholesale nursery greenhouse owner, who imports flower cuttings from Kenya, says he fully trusts that the multinational company he works for ensures good working conditions in the Kenyan greenhouses. However, he cannot say straight out what guarantees are in place regarding the working conditions. He explains that if a producer cannot deliver when an order is due, because of a plant disease or insect infestation, the producer doesn't get

A direct way of protesting against unfair work conditions is by helping companies label their products with the 'Unfairtrade Logo'.

paid. This puts a hard a lot of pressure on the Kenyan plant producers.

The Fair Trade label is one possible way of assuring a more secure and environmentally friendly production, ensuring social security for workers. This is not automatically the case. According to the report from Food & Water Watch,⁵ workers' riots due to poor working conditions have existed at least at one big Fair Trade company. In that particular case the Kenyan Industrial Court ruled in favour of the company, which raises the question how reliable the court system and government permits are in protecting workers rights?

Grassroots hold the answer

Despite the many sad stories, Mucheke is hopeful when speaking of the changes that are happening. He encourages everyone who can to financially support Kenyan people leading local initiatives. Grassroots organisations have the possibility of running projects outside the big cities, and it is the people who have grown up and lived in a place that know what needs to be done. Success in the anti-FGM movement is especially dependent on local people and grassroots initiatives.

The violent history of colonization has created a fear of repeating history and bringing 'answers' from the outside, which sometimes stops people from contributing to the positive work done in Kenya. Mucheke agrees that Kenyan people have been victims to much violence because of others forcing their ideas upon them. For instance, the first Christians that arrived in Kenya did not oppose of the colonization. "Colonists came with two weapons: the Bible, and the gun." He is clear with that to change the situation today it is money that is needed to support the local solutions that already exist.

Many people prefer donating to large organisations, as these are seen as more trustworthy than small local groups. As these organisations often work with disaster situations or project situated in large cities; the less prioritized areas are left without resources. Mucheke agrees that there are problems with corruption and money being stolen, but he does not think that the solution is to stop funding. Demanding documentation of how the money is being used, and dividing payment into smaller amounts are two ways to make sure the money reaches its goal.

Funding media campaigns is also of importance. Another way of actively taking part in the work is facilitating exchange programs that help people share their experiences.

Links across the world

Kamanda Mucheke underlines the importance of working in many ways to change the system causing poverty; a system built upon a history of colonization. Local initiatives may hold the solutions to the immediate issues, but changing the larger structures requires involvement from people across the world. The pressure placed upon European companies by consumers can have a great impact on the labouring conditions of Kenyan workers. One thought that comes to mind, listening to Mucheke's plead for action, is that the terms of trade between European countries and Kenya can only be upheld as long as consumers are accepting them without protest.

A direct way of protesting against unfair work conditions is by helping companies label their products with the 'Unfairtrade Logo'. This label, with the purpose of clarifying for consumers that a product is not Fair Trade, was created by Jeremy Williams and his brother Paul, who through their blog, *Make Wealth History*⁶, raise awareness of how consumption affects people and the environment. They

have offered several companies in the UK the possibility of labelling their products with the Unfairtrade Logo, all of which have declined. Jeremy and Paul encourage people to order stickers and start labelling products themselves. Living in the UK they join in networks and projects for a more sustainable way of living, and encourage others to do the same. Taking stand in their Christian faith they declare: “Our wealth is often based on others’ poverty and on the exploitation of the earth. So what we’re against is really inequality and greed.”

Despite the threat against his life, Kamanda Mucheke keeps spreading information about the violations of human rights and the struggle for gender equality in Kenya. He is not working to solve one single issue, but many, and through his many stories he shows how the position of women in society, the labouring conditions of workers and the issue of corruption and violence within government and police, are all interconnected with the issue of poverty. It is a large picture to grasp and the solution is not clear as glass. Yet, there are many ways of joining the struggle and listening to Kamanda Mucheke there is hope. He says: “We can’t afford to give up or despair.”

Further Reading

Kenyan National Commission on Human Rights
<http://www.knchr.org/>

FGM and Alternative Rites

Female Genital Mutilation – An overview (WHO)
http://whqlibdoc.who.int/publications/1998/9241561912_eng.pdf



(Endnotes)

- 1 See, The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner of Human Rights (25 February 2009) <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=9390&LangID=E>; And ‘UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, arbitrary or summary executions Mission to Kenya 16-25 February 2009’, Office of the United Nations High Commissioner of Human Rights(25 February 2009) <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=8673&LangID=E>
- 2 ‘The Children Act’, Laws of Kenya (No 8, 2001) http://www.kenyalaw.org/kenyalaw/klr_home/
- 3 ‘The Sexual Offences Act’, Laws of Kenya (No 3, 2006) http://www.kenyalaw.org/kenyalaw/klr_home/
- 4 Chege, Askew, and Liku, An Assessment of the Alternative Rites Approach for Encouraging Abandonment of Female Genital Mutilation in Kenya (2001) http://www.carraguard.com/pdfs/frontiers/FR_FinalReports/Kenya_FGC.pdf
- 5 ‘Lake Naivasha Withering Under the Assault of International Flower Vendors’, Food & Water Watch(2008) <http://www.canadians.org/water/documents/NaivashaReport08.pdf>
- 6 Make Wealth History, <http://makewealthhistory.org>

Images of Beauty and Equality: Towards an Open Dialogue on Sexual Orientation

Jooa Vuorinen

I have met the person I know is the half of my soul. Being with that person fills me with joy, thinking of her fills me with gratitude, together we feel we are full, a Unit. Finally I feel I am living Life in its Fullest, a Life that God meant for me to live.

But I can’t tell anyone.

At the 34th General Assembly of WSCF, it became obvious that within our Federation, just like in most of the Christian churches and ecumenical organisations these days, sexuality and particularly homosexuality are issues in which a dialogue is painfully needed. Yet, sexuality is not an easy issue to talk about. Particularly in churches and religions it divides us into different groups of different opinions and ethical teachings. Sometimes our different opinions and doctrines block us completely from having a dialogue that would be the tool for breaking the silence and for learning to know each other. There are many communities and societies where sexuality is considered a private matter and therefore should not be discussed in public. Not discussing it, however, does not help our many sisters and brothers who struggle with it as a matter of life and death every day.

In the Finnish Orthodox church where I am coming from, sexual orientation has been discussed in public for several years now from different points of view. For years the open discussion on homosexuality was silenced within our church. Every so often someone, a concerned

priest or lay person or a group of people tried to break the silence in the church around the issue that in the Finnish society otherwise has been largely discussed and accepted for decades. Nevertheless it took years until the conversation could start properly; but unfortunately there was little space in the debate for the voices of the homosexuals themselves. Finally, in January 2007 the debate was reinforced in Aamun Koitto, the biggest Orthodox journal in Finland. Active members of the church from laity to church workers, gay and straight alike would no longer allow themselves to be intimidated, shamed or threatened to keep quiet.

Over the course of the debate, one Orthodox theologian suggested that perhaps it is time to set aside the doctrines, theological teachings and fears, and take the stand for dialogue on different grounds:

“Sexuality is more a pastoral and ethical than dogmatic or canonical issue – in the framework of canons, our modern way of life in many other aspects is “wrong”. And what did Christ say about homosexuality? Nothing!” (Aamun Koitto 22/2008).

This is where I would like us to start from: set aside dogmas and canons, if not for longer than just for the time it takes to read this article, and look at some other aspects of the issue – particularly pastoral care of the Image of God.

One of the bases of Christian theology and Christian anthropology that all the churches share, regardless of the further doctrines on humanity of



Jooa Miriam Vuorinen was born in North Karelia, Finland, some time ago. She has lived in Estonia, worked as a professional choir conductor in the Orthodox church, and has a master's degree in theology from the University of Joensuu. She currently lives in Budapest, Hungary, working for the World Student Christian Federation as the Europe regional secretary.



Homosexuality is seen as a consequence of the fall of humanity, as original sin, as Satan's work in us from early childhood or youth, or at the most merciful, "the personal God-given cross". Whatever the explanation, result is the same bread of stone, but also a brutal break-down of self-acceptance that slowly turns into self-hatred and self-destruction. Even if many churches' theology defines sexuality as a part of the original Image of God and thus good by the origin, most of them still find any other orientation than heterosexuality being either a cross or from Satan.

It is not a surprise that many, particularly young, people cannot bear this contradiction and tension between their identity and the teachings of the church. Some are able to suffocate their sexuality, some leave the church. Terribly, many feel that they are beyond all hope as destroyed, broken images, and fee they do not deserve to live.

People come to church more than anywhere else seeking for healing, protection and acceptance by a loving community. Church as the Body of Christ does have the marvellous potential to be that kind of space, but unfortunately the church sometimes chooses not to use that opportunity. By rejecting openness towards homosexuality church not only hurts her members but also herself. As John Turner writes in his article in "Dreaming of Eden", so many gay people within our churches, especially those working for the churches, feel that they need to stay in the closet. The fear of rejection leads into alienation, and the chance for the person to open into full blossom as a beautiful image of God, and for the church to learn to know the beauty of that blossom, remains unused.

At the WSCF European thematic conference "Gender, society and religion – Exploring Diversity in Expanding Europe" in October 2009 we heard a lecture from a Romanian Orthodox priest, father Constantine Nicula. He

spoke eloquently about the Sacrament of Love. I must say I agreed with almost everything he said about the Sacrament and the balanced, nourishing triangle that mature, God-given love forms: the love of the couple is not limited to the couple themselves but reaches towards the Third – God, neighbour, Creation. From this Third dimension, the love of the couple receives its meaning and blessing and becomes a mission and an icon of God's love.

This wasn't the first time I heard this beautiful theology of partnership, but it was the first time I could understand and agree about this mystery. The relationship with my partner that God has given me has brought me to deeper-than-ever knowledge of God and God's love and mercy, turning my life into something no longer just my own but shared, and into something fruitful, fertile, less selfish than before. I could identify our relationship perfectly with the description of the Sacrament of Love by father Nicula as something that motivates the partners constantly and over and over again to turn the love they share into actions of love. The love of the two in the Sacrament of Love turns towards the Third; into growth together towards God; and towards openness to other people every day, encouraging and supporting one another in this mission of re-creation.

According to Father Nicula, however, this is not possible in a same-sex partnership. The only thing in his lecture I did not agree upon was that, in his experience, all homosexual relationships end up sooner or later being unhappy, because they cannot be co-creative or reproductive. His

argument was based on his experience, which I cannot argue against: all homosexual couples he has known have become unhappy, lacking something very deep in their lives. This I can certainly understand. No relationship can grow and develop in a healthy way in a vacuum.

Not only in Romania but in numerous other societies in and beyond Europe, same-sex relationships, no matter how many God-given blessings and sources of joy there may have been at the beginning, can turn into isolation, shame and sadness. Yet this is not clear evidence that these relationships are ungodly or unnatural. It is rather clear evidence of what happens when people are forced to try and live their love in a society totally alone, without families or friends who know about or accept their relationship and therefore are able to rejoice with them in times of joy and pray with them in times of sorrow.

Gay couples, like straight couples, have their ups and downs, but they don't necessarily have anyone to talk to or anyone to support them. A moment of crisis in a relationship can be easily abused by a homophobic pastoral counsellor who says "God wants to show you a way out of this sinful situation".

Another one of father Nicula's arguments against same-sex relationships truly was that they cannot carry in themselves the divine aspect of co-creation, which in his context means reproduction of children. If we leave adoption and in vitro insemination aside of this discussion, I would like to refer to all those heterosexual couples who cannot have children of their own. Is their marriage because of their childlessness, not

*Not discussing
it, however,
does not help
our many
sisters and
brothers who
struggle with
it as a matter
of life and
death every
day.*

each denomination, is that God created human being in God's own image. The origin of the human being was good, each of us sharing the same image and thus being equal. Remembering this is extremely relevant when we deal with ourselves, beloved ones, neighbours, and the issues that address and affect our daily lives all over the world. We were created on purpose as images of love, goodness and creativity; images of beauty and equality.

Nevertheless, as Kathy Galloway points out in her introduction to the book *Dreaming of Eden. Reflections on Christianity and Sexuality* the practice and implementation of equality of the Image is not same for everyone:

"Being told that we are made in the image of God is rather cold comfort if your particular embodiment of that is forbidden for the whole of your life to enjoy sexual delight with another person. [...] What father would give his son or daughter a stone when he asks for bread? Father God, it would seem, if his son or daughter is gay."

Churches, depending on the denomination, provide different theological or pastoral approaches to the problem.

We would not let silence reign when one member of our community is suffering.

the Sacrament of Love? Are those relationships then non-re-creative, and non-reproductive?

I've heard many theological answers to these questions (for the heterosexual couples, of course): in a loving partnership children are not the only co-creative dimension or the only fruit of reproduction. Some couples simply are not given children and despite of its painfulness they have another calling of co-creation to fill. It can be taking care of other people's children, parents, sick people or disabled ones, mission, research, community work, NGO work for social justice, god-children, or just having a house always open for whoever needs safety, support or encouragement. As long as the mutual love of the couple towards each other and towards God becomes embodied in any kind of action that will multiply their love, the relationship has fulfilled its calling to be co-creative and reproductive. What makes the same-sex relationships different from this?

It has to be said that nevertheless the challenges, a North American or European gay person regardless of the state or country they live in, are much more privileged than many of our sisters and brothers. In many societies homosexuality is still criminalised, leading to different kind of punishments ranging from castration against one's own will to imprisonment or even death penalty. Currently the state of Uganda is discussing a bill that would allow homosexuals to be sentenced to death, and would punish even people who are helping or supporting sexual minorities. In several societies where the law as such does not punish people for their sexual orientation, violent practices are publicly taking place and allowed: in South Africa every 10th lesbian is subjected to "corrective rape" in order to be turned heterosexual; and in various other countries gay men are illegally hunted by death patrols and tortured until death.

Yet, there is hope. The Church of Sweden has decided

to marry same-sex couples in the church; and in late 2008 the Orthodox Archbishop Leo of Karelia and All Finland in several public interviews (ie. Aamun Koitto 22/2008) said that the church is open for anyone regardless of their sexual orientation, and that even though the priests must live either in marriage with a woman or in celibacy, other people working for the church may live in a (registered) same-sex partnership. It might still be a statement not lived out in reality, but it is a significant step.

For me, a world based on the teaching of Jesus would be a world of equality, love and safety. I recognise the fact that the way there is long, and even in the ideal world we might not agree upon all issues that we have on our human agenda. But in my ideal world, we would not let silence reign when one member of our community is suffering. After all, we all are members of the same body, and if one member suffers, we suffer beside them. (1 Corinthians 12)

As a global community of young Christians in the 21st century, we have a great chance to achieve the ideal world of equality.

Resources

"Kathy Galloway, 'Introduction', in Kathy Galloway (ed.), Dreaming of Eden, Reflections on Christianity and Sexuality (Glasgow: Wild Goose Publications, 1997), 9-15.

John Turner, 'The cost of denial', in Kathy Galloway (ed.), Dreaming of Eden, Reflections on Christianity and Sexuality (Glasgow: Wild Goose Publications, 1997), 95-100.

Father Constantine Nicula, lecture at the conference 'Gender, society and religion – Exploring Diversity in Expanding Europe', 7th October 2009, Sambata de Sus.

Tapani Kärkkäinen, 'Homoseksuaalisuus jakaa mielipiteitä', Aamun Koitto, 22/2008 (2008), 10-11."

If my child would become heterosexual
 I guess I would still love her
 Although it's not what I'd hope for her, I know how difficult path that is:
 All those pregnancies
 and STDs
 and gender roles
 and expectations
 and subordination
 and traditions
 and the difficulty of coming in that Mission(ary) Impossible position.
 If that's what makes her happy
 As her mother
 I would have to accept
 even if I couldn't fully understand.
 Of course I would try to make sure that
 She understands the consequences
 And by bringing in for Sunday lunch all the desirable girls from the neighbourhood, I would try my best
 - as her mother I feel that is my obligation!
 I would recommend her to try out a woman,
 just for once, just in case
 To see that this thing with men can be just a phase,
 and actually, it can be so much more with the same sex...
 But, obviously, if that wouldn't work
 If she really felt that this is who she is
 I would accept.
 I would support.
 I would love her all the same.
 I would even try to understand, and for Christ's sake, no! I wouldn't be ashamed.
 But, of course, this is all very theoretical
 She's just a little baby
 I'm sure in the right atmosphere
 growing up in a good Christian family
 She will turn out to be
 Just a normal,
 healthy
 Lesbian.

The Fruit Of Your... Marriage: **Respecting** Tradition

While Widening Participation to Roman Catholic Matrimony



John Delap

John Delap is a Roman Catholic living in Dublin, Ireland. Originally from New York City, John studied at the Irish School of Ecumenics before moving to a position with the Access Service at Dublin Institute of Technology. He is working on rebuilding the Student Christian Movement in Ireland, so please send him an email if you are even mildly interested in getting involved: jodelap@gmail.com.

For Roman Catholics, the sacrament of Matrimony is a profound undertaking, right up there with the likes of Reconciliation and Holy Communion. This sacrament has long been celebrated in partnership by one male and one female, with each individual making a “perpetual and exclusive”¹ commitment to the other. Recently, the Catholic Church felt it was necessary to respond to a contemporary question concerning why two men or two women could not celebrate the sacrament of Matrimony together.

The Church’s official response can best be understood by looking at two documents issued by The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the Catholic body responsible for the development of doctrinal issues. The first statement, titled “Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons” explains that “it is unanimously accepted by the Catholic tradition” that homosexual tendencies are “intrinsically disordered.”² The second publication, issued in 2003, is more concerned with objections to same-sex unions, rather than homosexuality itself. The purpose of this missive is to assist ecclesial and civil leaders as they prepare “arguments...aimed at protecting and promoting the dignity of marriage, the foundation of the family and the stability of society.”³ This article will concentrate on the second of these two statements, examining the profound value of the Catholic understanding of Marriage while calling for a broadening of that understanding so as to be more inclusive.

To start, it should be made clear that the

Congregation asserts the equality of males and females. They also take pains to point out that all persons with “homosexual tendencies must be accepted with respect, compassion and sensitivity. Every sign of unjust discrimination in their regard should be avoided.” That said, they continue to outline the Roman Catholic Church’s opposition to both ecclesial and legal recognition for same-sex partnerships. The reasons provided here include that such relationships “close the sexual act to the gift of life” and that they “do not proceed from a genuine affective and sexual complementarity.”

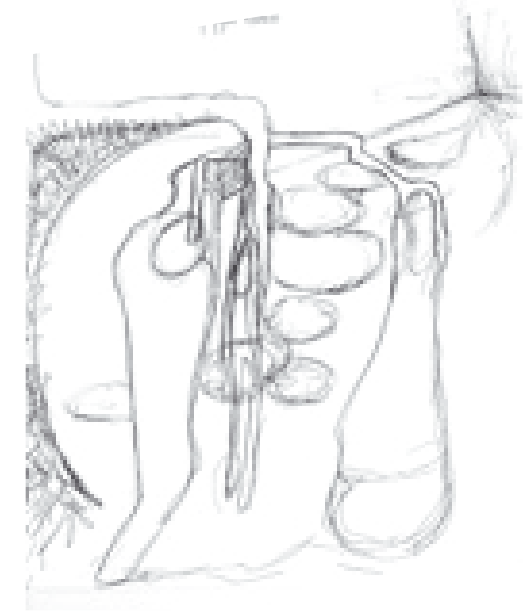
To respond to this, it may help to first briefly review three basic principles which inform the Catholic understanding of the institution of marriage: a) that males and females are complementary in the eyes of God,⁴ b) that a communion of persons is realized,⁵ and c) that the relationship bonded in marriage bears fruit.⁶ These three principles are indeed vital elements of any marriage, and this article does not seek to argue that any one of these three points should be disregarded. However, Catholics, together with the broader family of ecumenically minded Christians, might consider engaging in dialogue concerning ways in which the valuable Catholic conceptions of complementarity, communion and fruitfulness can be developed in a more inclusive way.⁷

The first principle, complementarity, stems from a Catholic belief that God put “male and female” (Gen 1:27) on Earth not as unequal

beings, but as complementary ones. Cardinal Ratzinger makes it clear in this statement that “sexual complementarity... belongs to the very nature of marriage.” Not all Catholics would see this male/female complementarity solely in sexual terms (i.e. as a physical male complementing a physical female). Indeed, two human beings can complement one another in a rich variety of ways, many of which may well contribute to the quality and longevity of a relationship. To be sure, this statement does hint at a broader notion of the concept of complementarity, stating that men and women possess “personal gifts, proper and exclusive to themselves” which complement each other in a specific way. Some take issue, however, with the notion that some gifts (other than those of physical genitalia) are unique only to females or only to males. This is, of course, part of an ongoing debate regarding the essential characteristics of what it means to be a man or a woman. We have seen arguments emerge which suggest that both sexes possess a range of qualities that can complement the qualities of a person of the same sex.

The idea of complementarity is a good foundation on which to build a marriage. We can look at the case of a heterosexual couple to illustrate this: As a man and a woman gradually build a relationship over time, they may (or may not) turn their thoughts to making a public commitment to one another via the institution of marriage. If they do, they are making a promise to witness each others’ lives, taking on all of the joy and the tedium that a life together will surely yield. If this man and this woman seek out the many social, emotional and physical dimensions in which they can serve as complements for each other, then they will likely be better able to build a well supported partnership. Complementary partnerships are sustainable partnerships.

Likewise, same-sex partners could complement and



support one another in the same way. To assume that the sole way a relationship can be complementary is via the biological sex of the partners in question is a very limiting understanding of this key element of marriage. A broadening of the understanding of complementarity would better reflect the diverse ways in which two human beings can balance one another. Sharing a wealth of different experiences, skills, and approaches will help keep a marriage healthy and will strengthen the partners within said marriage to continue witnessing Christ in their lives together.

If two persons can achieve this level of complementarity, they may be able to move towards a “communion of persons.” Catholics believe that the Creator instituted marriage as a function through which sexual complementarity could be realized, permitting man and woman to “become one flesh.” The idea of human communion forms an important element of sacramental marriage. This document suggests that such a communion can be achieved via “the use of the sexual faculty.” Sexual relations, the Congregation asserts here, are “human when they promote the mutual assistance of the sexes.”

Sexual relations between two men or two women can promote mutual assistance, both via “the use of the sexual



their own lives – a married person has the added, sometimes joyful, sometimes frustrating, task of witnessing their partner’s life and having their own life be witnessed by their partner. Out of this partnership, great work can emerge. If, as described above, a pair complements each other well, they then can build on each other’s strengths to yield all kinds of fruit. In marriage, a couple can work together to support a local community centre, they can visit the sick and the lonely, they can show solidarity with those facing disadvantage—in short, there are innumerable ways fruit can be bourn out of all marriages, opposite-sex, same-sex or otherwise.

The church maintains in this statement that “activities which do not represent a significant or positive contribution to the development of the human person” cannot and should not receive recognition. One must wonder, however, if we, as Christians, would better support our brothers and sisters by broadening our understanding of institutions like marriage so that they can encourage significant and positive contributions to the development of human persons for all who may wish to partake in the sacrament. By adhering to narrow conceptions of the key tenets of marriage, we, as a Church, may be denying worthy relationships the support they need to bear fruit.

These suggestions are not made with any intention of maligning the Roman Catholic Church. Indeed, a great many of the Church’s ideas, as laid out in this document and others like it, provide invaluable guidance for millions of couples worldwide. The concepts of complementarity, communion and fruitfulness are vital ones, and they should not be lost as the dialogue on this subject continues.

Some criticize the idea of broadening our understandings of these key concepts, alleging that doing so would undermine a sacred institution. To be sure, it is indeed possible that the institution of marriage could be damaged

by those who abuse the covenantal obligations which it confers. It is similarly damaging, however, to turn away people who yearn to celebrate in this solemn sacrament and who long to make a public commitment. Is it not our responsibility as Christians to make marriage accessible to all Christian couples who value building complementary relationships, who seek to commit themselves as one in flesh with another human being and who desire the Church’s support as they go about developing and harvesting the fruits of said relationship? Some Christians may respond with a hearty “yes” while others may reply with a just as hearty “no”. Regardless of one’s initial response to this admittedly thorny question, it raises important issues with which the ecumenical movement should continue to engage in a respectful way.

(Endnotes)

- 1 Catechism of the Catholic Church. Part II, Section 2, Chapter 3, Article 7.
- 2 “Letter to the Bishops on the Care of Homosexual Persons” Congregation on the Doctrine of the Faith. Rome, 1986.
- 3 “Considerations Regarding Proposals to Give Legal Recognition to Unions Between Homosexual Persons.” Congregation on the Doctrine of the Faith. Rome, 2003.
- 4 “Address of John Paul II to H.E. Mr. Donald Smith.” 4 September 2004.
- 5 “Considerations Regarding Proposals to Give Legal Recognition to Unions Between Homosexual Persons.” Congregation on the Doctrine of the Faith. Rome, 2003.
- 6 “Christ Made Marriage a Sacrament.” General Audience. 6 May 1992.
- 7 Dialogue on this issue is frequently emotive for all parties and it is



important that participants remain respectful of those with different views as this discussion continues.

8 The sexual dimension of marriage is but one element of the multi-faceted covenantal relationship that two people enter into on their wedding day. This short article does not, however, address the ethics of sexual intercourse within a marriage if the intention is not procreation.

facility” as well as through their spiritual commitment to one another. When two people enter into marriage they are entering into an arrangement which is a sign of the “covenant between Christ and the Church.” They are making a public commitment to each other and to God. It is this covenantal promise which provides the facility for two human beings to become one flesh. After making this commitment, the partners may then choose to engage in sexual acts as a manifestation of that human communion.

This leads to the third element of marriage: fruitfulness. One of the arguments against same-sex marriage detailed here is that “such unions cannot contribute to the survival of the human race” because they cannot bear biological children. But if this is so, then could it be that any couple unable to bear biological children is also unable to contribute to the survival of the human race?⁸ Born out of personal love and fueled by a public commitment, a marriage *should* bear fruit. But, just as there are many ways married individuals can complement each other, so too are there understandings of what it means to be fruitful.

All Christians have a responsibility to witness Christ in

That You May Recognise One Another: Introducing Gender Themes in Islam



Yusra Khreegi

Not having taken part in Europe-wide events for a couple of years, I was slightly unsure about my invitation, on behalf of FEMYSO (Federation of European Muslim Youth and Student Organisations) to deliver a seminar on “Islam and Gender” at the WSCF-E’s conference in Romania. However, the fact that I had enjoyed the previous European interfaith events in which I had participated in the past and the unique experiences they offered me were an important encouragement for me to overcome my doubts. Equally attractive for me was the topic of “Gender & Religion” which has been among the most interesting – if confusing and bewildering – topics for me for many years, and has become the central topic of my research over the last two and a half years.

With these incentives, I attended part of this week-long conference, which, just like my previous experiences, did not fail to offer the opportunity to clarify the answers to some of my own questions and those of others, as well as return with new questions to ponder.

Of course “Islam & Gender” is no novel topic, and the words bring a plethora of images to one’s mind, given their almost-daily recurrence in the media. However, the presentation of the topic is sadly too often plagued with sensationalism, exaggeration and ignorance. Hence, it was important to begin by going back to the basics. And since the task was to discuss what Islam had to say about gender, the logical place to start is Islam’s principal source of law and ethics – the Quran.

God & Gender

The central belief in Islam is that of *Tawhid* or unity – that God is One, Unique, and unlike any of His creations. One of the numerous Quranic verses emphasising this belief is:

*Say: He is God, the One and Only;
God, the Eternal, Absolute;
He begets not, nor is He begotten;
And there is none like unto Him.*

(Quran, 112: 1-4)

Thus, whereas a theology which reveals the divine through incarnation in a body inevitably locates it in a gender, passing judgement on the other sex, Islamic theology avoids this by emphasising the transcendence of the divine, above gender and other human categories. Of course God is referred to in the masculine pronoun (*Huwa*, He), but the Arabic language has no neuter. The use of the masculine pronoun does not imply masculinity, any more than femininity is implied by the use of the feminine pronoun for the plural of inanimate objects (a rule of Arabic grammar).

Diversity, dualities, multiplicities

The unity and uniqueness of the divine is in contrast with the diversity and multiplicity of the creation:

And among His Signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the variations in your languages and your colours: verily in that are Signs for those who know. (30:22)

Humans in contrast, were not created genderless or identical:

O people, we created you from the same male and female, and rendered you distinct peoples and tribes, that you may recognize one another. The best among you in the sight of God is the most righteous. God is Omniscient, Cognizant. (49:13)

The universe is characterised by diversity, and the aim is ‘recognition’ of one another rather than competition, as neither can claim superiority – in God’s sight – except through ‘righteousness’. It is important to note that dualities are a frequent feature of Quranic descriptions, for example:

*By the Night as it conceals (the light);
By the Day as it appears in glory;
By (the mystery of) the creation of male and female;-
Verily, (the ends) you strive for are diverse. (92:1-4)*

However, this view of dualities is very different from that of Greek philosophy, where one set of entities/characteristics (right, male, straight, light, good...) were opposed by another set (left, female, bent, darkness, evil...), which is not only



the opposite of the first, but also inferior to it. In contrast, the Islamic view of diversity is different, as each entity is a deliberate creation of God, not an inferior version of some superior original.

Creation

This is not to say that discrimination on the basis of sex is inexistent among Muslims. However, what is important to realise is that such discrimination is not based on the Quranic view of the value of maleness and femaleness. The Quran itself condemned strongly the preference of male children:

And when a daughter is announced to one of them, his face becomes black and he is full of wrath. He hides himself from the people because of the evil of that which is announced to him. Shall he keep it with disgrace or bury it (alive) in the dust? Surely now evil is what they judge. (16:58-59)

Nor is it to say that no attempts are made to fabricate such a basis in the Quran. While the story of the Creation of humans in the Quran is free from any indication that the female is created from a lesser essence, least of all from the male,

Yusra Khreegi is a doctoral student at the Near & Middle East Department, Faculty of Languages & Cultures at the School of Oriental African Studies, University of London. She also studied for her Bachelor’s in Physics at Imperial College London, then went on to complete her Master’s in astrophysics from Queen Mary University and an MPhil in Astrophysics at Imperial College London.

Yusra has extensive experience in community and youth work as well as interfaith work, both at the UK and Europe levels. She is a Board Member of the Islam Is Peace Campaign in the UK, Research Director at the cultural institution IslamExpo, Scout leader and founding member of the Muslim Scouts Federation as part of the British Scout Association, former executive committee member of the Federation of Student Islamic Societies in the UK and Eire and the MAB Youth. She has edited several student publications and has contributed articles to a number of papers including the Guardian Comment is Free, Lebanese Daily Star, the Muslim News and others.



such a view has crept into Islamic literature and persists in cultural imagery. The Quran stresses that males and females were created from the same nature/essence:

O mankind! Reverence your Guardian-Lord, who created you from a single entity/essence, created, of like nature, its mate, and from this pair scattered countless men and women. Reverence God, through Whom you demand your mutual (rights), and reverence the wombs (that bore you); for God ever watches over you.
(4:1)

It also presents a story of Adam and Eve in the Garden where both are addressed by God, both disobey Him, and both repent. There is no blame specifically put on Eve or her female progeny. Unfortunately, several medieval Quranic commentaries have included such stories of biblical origins, carrying the stereotype of woman as temptress.

Religious Responsibility

While humans are not presented in the Quran as genderless, but rather as men and women, the Quran does not distinguish between men and women in their religious duties. The Five Pillars of Islam, its basic principles, are gender-neutral: both men and women are expected to fulfil the Declaration of Faith, Prayer, Fasting, Almsgiving and Pilgrimage. And for their actions, they will be judged individually, and God will reward them accordingly:

There is no blame specifically put on Eve or her female progeny. Unfortunately, several medieval Quranic commentaries have included such stories of biblical origins, carrying the stereotype of woman as temptress.

Their Lord responded to them: ‘I never fail to reward any worker among you for any work you do, be you male or female – you are equal to one another.
(3:195)

Masculine & Feminine Characteristics

Cultural constructions of maleness and femaleness are common: “women are to be modest”, “men are to be brave”, etc. However, in the Quran, the “good” men and women are surprisingly described in identical terms:

For Muslim men and women, for believing men and women, for devout men and women, for true men and women, for men and women who are patient and constant, for men and women who humble themselves, for men and women who give in charity, for men and women who fast, for men and women who guard their chastity, and for men and women who engage much in God’s praise, for them has God prepared forgiveness and great reward.
(33:35)

Nor are men and women to seek inspiration from models “of their own gender”- since “good qualities” are not in themselves feminine or masculine, women can provide a model, or a warning, for both men and women. In one chapter,

for instance, the Quran presents the examples of four women, as “an example to those who believe/disbelieve”, not just as examples for women:

God sets forth an example to those who disbelieve the wife of Noah and the wife of Lot; they were both under two of Our righteous servants, but they acted treacherously towards them so they availed them naught against God, and it was said: Enter both the fire with those who enter.

And God sets forth an example to those who believe the wife of Pharaoh when she said: My Lord! Build for me a house with Thee in the garden and deliver me from Pharaoh and his doing and delivers me from the unjust people; And Maryam, the daughter of Imran, who guarded her chastity, so We breathed into her of Our inspiration and she accepted the truth of the words of her Lord and His Book, and she was of the obedient ones.
(66:10-12)

In fact the example of Mary, peace be upon her, is the greatest model of spirituality described at length in the Quran in a chapter bearing her name, where Mary is not only the Mother of Jesus, peace be upon him, but since her birth, she is presented as a unique individual with an intimate devotion to God.



Marriage

The inclination and attraction of men and women is presented as natural, healthy and positive in the Quran, with the appropriate setting for such relations being marriage. The marital relation is described as the closest and most intimate of human relations:

They (your spouses) are your garment and you are a garment for them.
(2:187)

And among His signs is this, that He has created for you mates from among yourselves, that you may dwell in tranquillity with them; and He has put love and mercy between you. Verily in that are signs for those who reflect.
(30:21)

The principal aim of marriage is to provide a stable atmosphere of tranquillity and trust, where each spouse's emotional and physical needs are fulfilled. Islamic literature does not shy away from discussing the issue of sex, and unlike certain other religious traditions, sexual relations, within marriage, are not condemned or discouraged, but seen as natural and healthy, to the extent of considering them as acts bringing God's reward.

Another aim of marriage is producing children to be raised in a stable and secure environment. Parenthood is viewed as a weighty duty upon fathers and mothers, and on the other hand, veneration of one's parents, particularly in their old age is a recurrent feature of the Quranic and Prophetic vision. Mothers in particular are to be venerated and treated with the utmost kindness and love, to reciprocate the kindness and mercy they themselves dispensed:

And We have enjoined on man doing of good to his parents; with trouble did his mother bear him and with trouble did she bring him forth.
(46: 15)

However, the valuing of parenthood and motherhood in particular does not imply that the latter is the sole role expected of women. Several Quranic female models (such as that of the wife of Pharaoh mentioned above) were either childless, or their role as mother was simply not mentioned. Aisha, Prophet Muhammad's second wife (after the death of his first wife Khadija who bore all his surviving children) had no children. Yet, A'isha taught hadith in the first mosque of Islam, was consulted as the first authority on legal questions, and is remembered as lively, intelligent, devout, and humbling to all subsequent memory.

Leadership

This brings us to the question of 'female leadership', one that is a topic of heated debates in several religious traditions. While in classical Fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence), female political leadership was generally not accepted, the Quran itself does not provide an explicit answer, although it does present the example of the Queen of Sheba who is praised as a wise and just ruler. The debate continues, particularly since political systems have changed, and authority of the ruler has been de-centralised.

However, an issue of greater interest and consequence is that of religious leadership, which was raised by some of the participants, being a contested issue in Christian debates. While the question of



female imams, or prayer leaders, has attracted attention in the last few years, most Muslim women appear to show no great interest in the position of Imam, both traditionally throughout Islamic history and in modern times. This is because of the absence of inherent prestige and authority in the imamate. One can be a religious leader without being imam of a mosque. Greater authority and influence is to be found in the status of scholars of the religious sciences, such as exegesis of the Quran, the Sciences of the Prophetic Hadith, and particularly in jurisprudence,



C SARA ALI, DEVIANTART.COM

through which the laws governing Muslims’ lives are derived from the sources by those trained to acquire the necessary skills. It is these fields that have indeed been lacking in women’s contributions, and it is these fields which are seeing a revival of Muslim women’s involvement. A hundred years ago the orientalist Ignaz Goldziher showed that fifteen percent of medieval hadith scholars were women, teaching in the mosques and universally admired for their integrity. Colleges such as the Saqlatuniya Madrasa in Cairo were funded and staffed entirely by women. In Cordoba, renowned for its Great Library which contained 400,000 volumes, the head librarian, Talid, employed a female deputy named Labna, who acted as the Library’s specialized acquisition expert in the bookstalls and with the merchants of Cairo, Damascus and Baghdad. According to historian Fred Leemhuis, women were employed in many of the Caliphates’ royal libraries in Andalucia. Another historian noted that in one eastern suburb of Cordoba, the Mosque authorities employed 170 women scribes solely to make Kufic copies of the Qu’ran. In her study of Muslim female academicians, Ruth Roded commented that

If U.S. and European historians feel a need to reconstruct women’s history because women are invisible in the traditional sources, Islamic scholars are faced with a plethora of source material that has only begun to be studied... In reading the biographies of thousands of Muslim women scholars, one is amazed at the evidence that contradicts the view of Muslim women as marginal, secluded, and restricted.

Stereotypes are further challenged when Roded documents the fact that the proportion of female lecturers in many classical Islamic colleges was higher than in modern Western universities. While the contribution of Muslim

women to scholarship has declined over the centuries, inevitably leading to the absence of a female perspective on Islamic law, recent decades have seen a much-needed re-introduction of female scholarship in the re-interpretation of the religious sources.

Muslim Women & European Mosques

As for the matter of women’s access to mosques, Islam does not establish sacred spaces inaccessible to women. Women can and do enter the Holy Ka’ba. The Inner Court of the Temple in Jerusalem before its demolition by the Romans was out of bounds to women, who faced the death penalty if they penetrated it. Under Muslim auspices, it was thrown open to both sexes. Hence the Dome of the Rock, the golden structure which still symbolises the Celestial City, and which marks the terrestrial point of the Mi’raj (Prophet Muhammad’s ascension to heaven), is allocated on Fridays exclusively to women, so that men pray in the nearby al-Aqsa mosque hall. Here, as elsewhere, the sexes are segregated during congregational prayers, and the reason given for this is again the pragmatic one that is the avoidance of distraction that could result during a form of worship which entails a good deal of physical contact.

In contrast, some mosques built by immigrant communities in Europe have inadequate, or non-existent, provision for women worshippers. In some cases, this is a result of either logistical considerations (shortage of space, etc.) but it can at times result from a conservative viewing women’s attendance as something unnecessary or undesirable. Perhaps surprisingly, Europe is the only place I have encountered such a problem, as during my travels in several Arab countries, Turkey, and Malaysia, there was no

area of any mosque that I found myself barred from accessing, and women regularly attended the mosque and circulated freely within its space. This realisation that inadequate provision for women’s access to mosques has nothing to do with Islam has recently led to Muslim women, and men, speaking up against it and seeking to change the situation, by re-activating women’s involvement in mosques and other community spaces.

What about All Those Other Problems?

The same contradiction and confusion of religion with culture and social customs is responsible for a list of other challenges, some of which were raised during the presentation and the following discussion. Just like women’s deprivation of access to mosques, phenomena such as forced marriage and so-called ‘honour killings’ do exist, not because of Islam, but in spite of it. The absence of such phenomena in large sections of Muslim communities and their existence in certain minorities of other faiths (e.g. Hinduism and Sikhism) highlights again the importance of distinguishing between religion and other cultural, social and economic factors. This realisation is important since in order to combat such problems, religion, as a potent and effective influence in Muslim communities, must be used as part of the solution, rather than unfairly blamed for such problems.

Thus in conclusion, the presentation, and this article, sought not to address every aspect of the vast topic of “Islam & Gender”, but to highlight the complexity of the topic. A discussion of such a topic requires the separation of the basic foundations that are clearly laid out in the fundamental sources (the essential equality of men and

women, their common origin, their equality before God, their identical religious duties...) from matters that have always been open to diverse opinions and interpretations (family law, political leadership etc.) and to which the female perspective must, and has started to, make important contributions; and from other matters that have been confused with religion, while they are a result of other cultural and social factors, and a new religious education is bound to help in providing effective solutions to such problems.

A discussion of the topic of “Islam & Gender” requires a familiarity with a diverse and rich juristic heritage, regional heterogeneity, and historical evolution. Such a complexity ought to make us cautious against sweeping generalisations about “Islam & Gender”.

Further Reading:

- Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*.
Asma Barlas, “Believing Women” in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur’an.
Katherine Bullock, *Rethinking Muslim Women and the Veil: Challenging Historical & Modern Stereotype*.
Akram Nadwi, *Al-Muhaddithat: The Women Scholars in Islam* by Mohammed.
Ruth Roded, *Women in Islam and the Middle East: A Reader*.
Ruth Roded, *Women in Islamic Biographical Collections: From Ibn Sa’d to Who’s Who*.
Annemarie Schimmel, *My Soul Is a Woman: The Feminine in Islam*.
Amira El-Azhary Sonbol, *Beyond The Exotic: Women’s Histories In Islamic Societies*.
Amira El-Azhary Sonbol, *Women, the Family, and Divorce Laws in Islamic History*.
T. J. Winter and John A. Williams, *Understanding Islam and the Muslims: The Muslim Family and Islam and World Peace*.

Towards a New Spirituality: From the Archives



The WSCF European Women's Project Newsletter No. 3, published in March 1979, contained contributions from groups of women in all parts of Europe, and ideas which have influenced them, in the hope that it would stimulate further thinking on the implications of "the women's movement, theology, and spirituality". The Women's Working Group later became the Gender Working Group. Caroline Smith was a member of the Women's project and of British and Irish SCM.

Caroline Smith

It is a 'new', yet 'old', spirituality that we need to discover. It is not Christian spirituality that in essence bad, but the way it has been distorted and obscured that has bruised and crushed people, and not freed them. In this paper I will try and show how patriarchal structures and ideology are incompatible with a true Christian spirituality. This insidious ideology has governed and influenced society in the place of a true Christian influence.

Crushing Patriarchal Spirituality

Traditional patriarchal 'piety' has crushed both women and men, physically and psychologically. Individuals have been polarised from their bodies, taught to abhor their natural instincts, flee their sexuality and suppress their emotions for their intellect. Women have been made powerless, men powerful. Women and men have been divided from themselves, each other, and God. They have also been divided from the world. Today we can see this abdication of responsibility for the world in preoccupation with internal church politics and private piety.

In the time of the early church fathers the ascetic life was pronounced the highest road to salvation. The first degree in spirituality could be achieved by self-flagellation, the hair shirt, the scourge – denying bodily pleasures of food and sexuality. The ascetic obsessively cleansed her/his soul, fleeing the wicked world to a spiritual

'haven', life a prison sentence to be endured by those truly from another world.

Thomas Aquinas believed "Virgins are the more honoured portion of Christ's flock, and their glory more sublime in comparison with widows and married women... The error of Jorian consisted in holding virginity not to be preferable to marriage. This error is refuted above all by the example of Christ who both chose a Virgin for His mother and remained Himself a Virgin."

Gradually, however, the emphasis changed from seeing virginity as a 'means' for spiritual enlightenment to its being an 'end' in itself. It became more important for the virgin to defend her virginity and die for it than to live with the stain of dishonour. Saints were canonised for the way they gallantly staved off their lusty attackers. It has been pointed out that all the women listed in the Roman Catholic Mass liturgy are virgin martyrs.

Once the rules had grown out of all the proportion to the people, virginity had become more important than human lives. It was the preservation of virginity, rather than Christianity that was all important, too. Christ, the original inspiration and reason, was lost in the process. In the early ascetic's search for spirituality we see an example of what has deformed our spirituality and Christian influence in the world. The 'means' have grown continuously until smothering the goal itself. In the church the potency and impact of the Christian message has been diluted by the introversion and elitism of theology, the process

of living out Christianity giving way to the idea. When the ideal justifies the process, as virginity came to justify the expenses of life, we have the fanaticism of the crusaders. This is an effect of the very nature of patriarchy, that of power-seeking, domination, authoritarianism which has distorted what originally was something good. Christianity must not become an idol, worshipped for itself. The ideology must not sacrifice people.

A New Spirituality

When we become conscious of how religious ideologies bolster oppressive structures in society, we realise the vital role that a new Christian spirituality can play in destroying these, by directly challenging them through action. A new spirituality must not be just a private piety. We cannot first put ourselves right and only then be ready to tackle the world, but our lives must be a process of praxis of acting, reflecting, meditating and acting. In this way, we will grow, learn more of God, understand ourselves and others and participate in the world. But we must see a 'new' spirituality which must not become just a reversal and perpetuation of patriarchy. It must assert that human beings are more important than ideologies, and that the aims, the sacredness and worth of human lives and aspirations, are not to be eclipsed and forgotten in the process of achieving a supposedly more just and equal society.

People have been crushed psychologically by 'piety'. From the early ascetic fathers, women have been told they are morally inferior to men. Whilst the stringent demands of the ascetic life



oppressed both women and men, women had a double load to bear. Whilst the man had only to transcend his fallen state – traditional 'male-ness' in essence being good – fortitude, virtue, bravery, spirit – the woman had also to overcome her female 'nature', which she was informed was naturally sinful – wicked temptress, bodily pollution, imbecile. Whilst we can imagine this would be easy to overcome, as women are not naturally 'imbeciles' or 'temptresses', nevertheless, women do have bodily emanations which were regarded as polluting and imprisoning. As is obvious today, when women suffer a continuous barrage of subtle and obvious social and ideological discrimination, continuously being told they have certain natural characteristics and defects, they internalise this and eventually believe these are, in fact, natural. So when a

woman was continuously told that the highest spirituality could be achieved only when she put off her femaleness and took on the soul of a man, she believed maleness was more sacred than femaleness.

Saint Jerome stated it: “As long as woman is for birth and children she is different from men, as body is from soul. But when she wished to serve Christ more than the world then she will cease to be a woman and will be called man.”

Marin Warner, in her article “The Impossible Ideal?”¹, shows the implications of this where St. Perpetua dreamed that she was transformed into a man before winning victories for Christ. “She puts off the weakness of her sex to assume the image that approximates to her religion’s view of strength and fortitude and courage – the image of manliness.”

The Blasphemy of Being Second Best

Tradition has encouraged women not only to despise their female bodies, but to believe they are inferior to men, that men are more capable and suitable to serve Christ than women are. Women believe they should only fulfil their aspirations through the lives and work of their husbands. This is still a contemporary train of thought – at the General Synod of the Anglican Church in Britain, November ’78, during the debate on the ordination of women; one man remarked that women who wanted to be ordained should marry clergymen.

This is the most insidious way that traditional piety has oppressed women, in that it has



dehumanised them, made them powerless, negatively passive, feel inadequate, and settle for second place. Above all, it has encouraged them to abdicate responsibility for their lives to their husbands.

As Simone de Beauvoir puts it, “Man-the-sovereign will provide woman the liege with material protection and will undertake the moral justification of her existence; thus she can evade at once both economic risk and the metaphysical risk of a liberty in which ends and aims must be contrived without assistance. Indeed along with the ethical urge of each individual to affirm his subjective existence, there is also the temptation to forgo liberty and become a thing. This is an inauspicious road for he who takes it – passive, lost, ruined – becomes henceforth the creature of another’s will frustrated in his transcendence and deprived of every value. But it is an easy road, on it one avoids the strain existence... Thus woman may fail to lay

It takes a strong person to go through the difficulties and traumas of breaking new ground, challenging the status quo, rejecting conformity and popularity for the steeper path of truth.

claim to the status of subject because she lacks definite resources, because she feels the necessary bond that ties her to man regardless of reciprocity, and because she is often very well please with her role as the other.” sic. (author’s sexist language)²

Women in the Roman Catholic conference in Baltimore, November ’78, on the ordination of women wore badges bluntly demanding women to confront their lost selves and take responsibility for their lives. The badge stated “Men stop being M.C.P.’s, women stop being F.U.T.’s”. Men, stop being male chauvinist pigs; women, stop being female Uncle Tom’s.

A female Uncle Tom is recognised as a woman who buys into esteem and automatic status through her husband’s position. Women should stop sacrificing their own potential and talent for those of their husbands. From the convent to the pastor’s wife, those who were and are female and religiously inclined are being challenged to fight against their acceptance that they can only serve God through maleness.

It is blasphemy to accept that we are second best. It is denying the image of God in each of us, and denying the responsibility that we now have as co-creators with Christ, having been drawn into divinity through the incarnation and crucifixion. We can no longer abdicate responsibility for the world, through a fatalistic acceptance of things as they are, with the deadness and despair this leads to. We can not, either, just ignore power. We must deal with it, use it to ‘empower’ others. We must have hope and vision and actively participate in the world as co-workers with God.

This realisation is no less than a revolution in many women’s lives. It takes a strong person to go through the difficulties and traumas of breaking new ground, challenging the status quo, rejecting conformity and popularity for the steeper path of truth. The rejection by others in the church, by those we love, can be an intolerable burden. It is a tough cross to refuse a tempting and comfortable, dependent position – Simone de Beauvoir reminds us it means for woman “To renounce all the advantages conferred on her by her alliance with the superior caste.” It is a heavy cross to face the loneliness after guilt that is bestowed on a ‘disrupter’ as being another thorn in the body of Christ.

But all are threatened by the power of the truth, in fact we are threatened by anything new and different – change. It has been a sad, but noticeable fact that those women most fanatically against women priests are wives of clergymen. Those who fought most adamantly against women becoming Methodist ministers are wives to ministers. The relationship with most tensions in Sweden is between women priests and women married to priests. The same dynamics work in society; those most against professional women are very often housewives. Women have been set against each other. Women priests threaten the position and security of the wife of a clergyman. Many have accepted that they should only fulfil their aspirations through their husbands, and to confront and accept women priests is perhaps to confront their lost selves and aspirations.

We often try to destroy what we can not face. St. Paul fought relentlessly to persecute Christians



before he joined them – threatened by the power of the truth the first Christian martyrs displayed. Christ was killed because he presented the absolute truth to society, which they could not take.

Freeing People

But how can we free people rather than crush them? How can we communicate with other women without blame and guilt, without alienating and intimidating them? People have been crushed and destroyed by Christian piety, by men ‘dictating’ spirituality. We do not want simply to reverse and perpetuate manipulation.

We must find a way of speaking with people without destroying them, without dictating to them, but without compromising the truth. We must question our motives: are we interested in their needs, or those needs we think they should have? Are we merely satisfying our own lust for knowing all the answers, the power this brings that reduces the other person to ‘dependency’?

We must reverse the way of influencing people by power over them. Even if used for the ‘right’ ends, manipulation and authoritarianism only force people, and women as the greatest victims, to shrink into themselves, to construct barricades of defence, through which, no matter how loud and hard and violently we shout, we will get no response. We can only find this way through love and caring. As Martin Luther King said – love is the only power strong enough to overcome hate. Christ found this way, turning people outwards, treating women as human beings with responsibility for their own lives.

At various stages in history the church has undergone a revolution of significant nature, such as the change that was brought about with the advent of Luther and Protestantism. Then the women’s second spiritual option became

We can only find this way through love and caring. Christ found this way, turning people outwards, treating women as human beings with responsibility for their own lives.

sanctified – that of mother – and no longer was stern asceticism advocated as the highest route to spirituality. With the rejection of earning one’s passage to heaven, and the new emphasis on justification by grace alone, a person could now be a spiritual professional in the home. Marriage and the family became sanctified and romanticised, with a new spiritual significance as the guardian of morality and piety, symbolised by the mother’s gentle obedience. But whilst spirituality had become more integrated into human life, it was still a private, personal application of faith, as R. Ruether describes in her article on “The Cult of True Womanhood”.³ The home became in essence the ‘feminine’ sphere, a romantic escape from the alienation of the real male world where Christian ideals were out of place and not expected of people. The church, too, was given a peripheral ‘feminine’ role to society. Women were privatised and domesticated and kept firmly in the home – as guardians of the last strong-hold of morality. The clergy, too, have been kept firmly in the confines of the church.

A new spirituality for women and for men must break with patriarchy, it must break with the pursuit of power along with the influence of the private, self-contained Christianity, with its abdication from the world. We must reintegrate the church and Christian values into society and not keep them separate for our own indulgence. Christianity can play a part in influencing structures, ideologies and methods. Let us make sure it is a positive one.

Spirituality must be a de-conditioning, liberating process, whereby we destroy our false

selves. We must find the tension between self-criticism and humility and self-affirmation and righteous anger. Only an autonomous person can freely give themselves without being dissolved by the will and desires of another. Only then can we become dependent on each other in a community of giving and receiving. Only then can we become the body of Christ.

We must deny certain spiritual options, such as – blind faith, balanced precariously on emotions, that collapses under scrutiny by the mind, that demands total, unquestioning obedience. Or, the other extreme of purely intellectual faith, a mind, spirit, that controls and subjugates passion – that denies the beauty and humility of revealing emotions, responding, opening and giving to others. We don’t want theology and rules removed from the people, and therefore the responsibility and realisation of the damage caused. This new spirituality must be in harmony with theological and investigation that springs from a practical love for people.

(Endnotes)

- 1 Christian Action. 1971. Christian Action Journal. London: Christian Action Publications, Supplement: Churchwomanship in a Man’s World.
- 2 Beauvoir, Simone de, and H. M. Parshley. 1979. *The second sex*. Franklin Center, Pa: Franklin Library.
- 3 Ruether, Rosemary Radford. 1975. *New woman, new earth: sexist ideologies and human liberation*. New York: Seabury Press.

Christ our Mother:

A Meditation at the Foot of the Cross



CVILLE MIETTINEN, FLICKR.COM



God made Godself known in the death and resurrection of Jesus. As Christians we find our defining relation to God in the experience of the cross and resurrection. Not as historical remembrances but as events, mysteries to enter into. To enter into relation with God as revealed on the cross is to begin a radical transformation. In the New Testament this transformation is called a new creation or a new birth. Christian renewal and liberation have always sprung from meditation and prayer at the foot of the cross. Here the obscure nun Julian of Norwich came to a realisation of the love of God in contrast to the wrath of medieval theology. She understood that God's compassion did away with blame and that God sympathised with our suffering. God wanted to enter into solidarity with us and to bring us spiritual birth and so God came to experience human life, wickedness and death. Two passages are of particular importance and are to be savoured:

“Thus he carried us within himself in love. And he is in labour until the time has fully come for him to suffer the sharpest pangs and most appalling pain possible – and in the end dies. And not even when this is over, and we ourselves have been born to eternal bliss, is his marvellous love completely satisfied...”

“The human mother may put her child tenderly to her breast, but Mother Jesus simply leads us into his blessed breast through his open side, and there gives us a glimpse of the Godhead

and heavenly joy – the inner certainty of eternal bliss.”¹

In this group meditation, which can be adapted for individual use, we wait on God and enter into the mystery of our spiritual birth on the cross in order that we might find guidance and be renewed in compassion, wisdom, and faithfulness.

The worship leader leads the gathering in a relaxation exercise, leading them to rest from the cares of the day and become aware of the loving exchange of the Trinity.

Then the leader begins with this prayer:

God, whose glory fills the whole world,
Our kindly Father, you sustain all beings in your creative power. Now show us in the passion of your Christ that love has triumphed over wickedness, and opened the gates of heaven.

All respond with the prayer:

**Holy God,
Holy and Strong,
Holy Immortal One,
have mercy on us.**

Here someone reads from the Passion according to John, John 19.16-30;[31-35]. Followed by a brief silence and then this prayer:

God, whose wisdom enlightens all people,
Our kindly Mother, in your death upon the cross

you bore us to eternal life. Grant us a union in your suffering and draw us to your side; give us to know and trust in you, whose pleasure it is to liberate us from sin and injustice.

All respond with the prayer:

**Holy God,
Holy and Strong,
Holy Immortal One,
have mercy on us.**

In a period of silence the group bring their own cares and concerns and those of the church and the world that they may enter with them into the mystery of Christ's own suffering with the world. To help focus the meditation one of the following verses can be repeated together (with or without intercessions).

We adore you, O Christ, and we praise you because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world!

or

In thy resurrection, O Christ, let heaven and earth rejoice, alleluia.

or

Bless the Lord my soul, and bless God's Holy name. Bless the Lord my soul, who leads me into life.²

The meditation is ended with this prayer:

Spirit God, whose love and goodness descends from above. Lord of Life, your power raised Jesus from the tomb. Bring us into the wonderful exchange of the Godhead, And let us know Christ Jesus as Mother, Friend and Saviour, As we work for compassion, truth and justice.

And all respond with the prayer:

**Holy God,
Holy and Strong,
Holy Immortal One,
have mercy on us.**

Before departing quietly the group join in this blessing:

**God's blessing be yours, and well may it befall you;
Christ's blessing be yours, and well be you entreated;
Spirit's blessing be yours, and well spend your lives,
each day that you rise up, each night that you lie down,
and the blessing of God Almighty, God All-Wise and God All-Good, Be among us and remain with us always. Amen**

Let us bless the Lord,

Thanks be to God!

(Endnotes)

¹ Julian of Norwich, Revelations of Divine Love, 1988, Penguin Classics, London

² These can be said or sung to the Taize chants for these texts. <http://www.taize.fr/>



Reading in Relation:

Introducing Contextual Bible Study

The Bible is a text of liberation but we know that the Bible has been used as a text of oppression, supporting discrimination, exclusion and violence. This can happen where the Bible is made a part of a dominant discourse or language; such as the language of money or the discourse of politics. At times the Church's reading of the Bible serves to support or make such dominant discourses. Discourse or language is often an important tool of oppression where it can be used to limit what we are able to say or think or even see. This affects our reading of the Bible. A discourse of oppression can affect how we interpret scripture or which passages of scripture we choose to read and emphasise. It can even affect the way we understand our relationship to God through the text. Originally in South Africa oppressed and minority communities developed contextual bible study to shortcut circuit, to bypass, the dominant readings of scripture which reinforced apartheid, gender based violence and the stigma of HIV/AIDS. In doing so they allowed the Bible to be a text of liberation, of transformation, and allowed God to speak to them through their communal reading.

This short circuit is possible because contextual bible study takes the text away from the dominant discourse and re-centres it through a close reading. In contextual bible study we are interested in the text's own

context, in its characters, events, sayings and details and what these tell us about God and how God deals with people. It is then that we find the text reconnecting with our own context, our relationships, actions and language.

Now the method is simple and is best done in a small group of eight or fifteen people either informally or more formally. On the following page are two bible studies around gender to use in your own groups. It is useful if one person facilitates by helping the discussion along and ensuring that everyone is included. It is important that everyone is able to bring her or his skills, questions and insights and especially each person's own experience of faith. After opening with a prayer (and later closing with a blessing) the group reads a passage of scripture together and then works through a series of questions approaching the text. The questions begin with reflecting on initial reactions and exploring details in the text before discussing the text and its context. Finally, the group explores the similarities between then and now before asking what they can take from the study. It is important to leave time for this last question because when we read the bible we expect to encounter God and so be empowered and transformed.

Prayer

Blessed Lord, who caused all Holy Scriptures to be written for our learning; help us so to hear them, to read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them that through patience, and the comfort of your holy word, we may embrace and forever hold fast the hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ.

2 Samuel 1.1-27,
"I am Distressed for you my brother Jonathan."

Q1: What jumps off the page at you from this text?

Q2: i) What different aspects of masculinity are exhibited in the text? ii) How are they portrayed?

Q3 in two groups: First group, i) What might David's lament tell us about the aspects of masculinity in the story? Second group, ii) What might David's lament tell us about his love for Saul and Jonathan?

Q4: How does this story relate to images of masculinity and love in our society today?

Q5: How does this reflection challenge or help our own gender awareness and faith

John 04:5-26, "What you have said is true.. Sir, I see that you are a prophet."

Q1: What jumps off the page at you from this text?

Q2: What does the text tell us about the woman's place in her community? What does it tell us about her as a person? How does she respond to Jesus? What is she looking for?

Q3: How does Jesus reach out to her?

Q4 in two groups: First group, i) In what ways can you identify with the woman and with her experience of meeting Jesus? Second group, Q5: Who are the 'Samaritan Women' in our society today? And, how might we enter into a meaningful dialogue with them?

Q5: What might we take out of this reflection to help us, in our own encounter with Jesus or in communicating Jesus to others?

Blessing

Where there is faith there is love,
Where there is love there is peace,
Where there is peace there is blessing,
Where there is blessing there is God
Where there is God is all we need.

May the Holy Spirit keep us in the love of God,
And lead us to eternal life through the mercy of Christ Jesus.

Further resources:
Ujamaa Centre, South Africa: <http://www.ukzn.ac.za/sorat/ujamaa/resources.htm>
Scottish Bible Society: <http://www.scottishbiblesociety.org/conversations/>

Identity, Diversity and Dialogue... and Thailand: On the WSCF Interregional Event



Katka Babicová

Katka Babicová (1988)
A roman-catholic student from Slovakia, graduated with BA from Comenius University in Swedish and German in 2009. She has been living in Denmark and studying Danish since the last summer and is a volunteer WSCF-E's Links Coordinator.

In this globalised world everyone has probably once experienced a situation where she or he was exposed to the feeling of being “the other” in a different culture. So, it was with us in Thailand. We came from at least six different cultures (from six continents) and were to stay together for two weeks “within” the Thai culture. It might seem that under these circumstances it would be quite easy to talk about Identity and Diversity. However, we experienced a strong paradoxical feeling of one-likeness and difference at the same time. The paradoxes were continually coming and going, north and south and though Christian tradition and values were held in common, it was really tempting to form skin-deep impressions. We are all the same, but throughout the two weeks, we were slowly uncovering things for which we were sometimes unprepared.

This report will become one story with many layers, exactly like a person's Identity; as according to Rev. Michael Blair of the United Church of Canada, one of the lecturers at the interregional event.

First Layer – A European

Sitting and drinking coffee at Berlin-Tegel airport, writing last-minute emails, expecting to be cut from internet access during the eleven hour flight to Bangkok – a tough burden. I was preparing for the first time that I would feel, what it means to feel odd, to be white-skinned, red-haired, to

speak reasonable English, and to have at least a little money for some Christmas presents. Already, I began a deeper exploration of IDENTITY, DIVERSITY and DIALOGUE, the annual theme for the year 2009, which is also the theme of the Inter-Regional event of WSCF. We would gather together to examine, learn, discuss to enrich ourselves and get-to-know the topic's core and different aspects of it.

Second Layer – A Woman

I have only recently moved to Denmark and have become more gender neutral in my thinking. Yet in Thailand, or Asia in general, one is exposed to the reality of a significant gender imbalance in many respects. Starting with a tour of the traditional divisions of work in the professions we ended up in the famous Red Light District of Bangkok city, from where many of us were left with feelings that are difficult to digest. The trafficking of women for prostitution in Asia, and particularly in Thailand, will not end until westerners stop the sex tourism which devalues and devastates the dignity of human beings. Staying in Thailand caused a real split in my identity as a woman and a European. On the one hand, one feels solidarity with one's own sex and on the other hand ashamed for the prejudice that comes with originating from a certain part of the world.

Third Layer – A Student

Studying and then working for a living, meeting targets, making plans, a future. What about people who live their entire life in a refugee camp, unimportant, on the Thai-Burmese border, or in a Palestinian camps in Jordan or in Morocco? Life becomes just a row of days spent getting food from the UN, eating, playing football, washing dishes and clothes... and dreaming of returning to their homeland country. And so it goes from one generation to another and the last occupation is also slowly dying out.

Fourth Layer – A Slovakian

Slovaks form the majority of the population in Slovakia, so I do not have direct experience living as a minority in my homeland. Therefore, I felt the lack of an emotional involvement, unlike many in the group, as demonstrated in most of the discussion regarding the topic. The most visible and focused example was of the Burmese people in Thailand. I was able use this as an eye-witness example to help examine my own questions around the negative status of minorities such as identity, work conditions, belief, education, etc. and got to know, that the negative “aspects” of both legal and illegal minorities are present in many similar forms all over the world.

Fifth Layer – A Self-Diagnosed Introvert

An introvert is likely to cope better in a large group, where she or he could remain anonymous forever and could always pretend to be with somebody. But in

smaller groups, an introvert cannot escape from getting to know people and getting closer. However, the group that met in Thailand was not only full of people, who did not know each other beforehand but who were on the top of that exposed to hard emotional situations together, so that our journey could not end anywhere else, than in very close relationships and a massive social value for all of us. The social aspect and friendships that were founded were probably the most visible results of Diversity and Dialogue among different Identities.

Sixth Layer – A Heterosexual

Bangkok during the day is full of people, shopping malls, beggars on the streets, canals similar to those of Venice, brutally hot and wet climate, stinky meals, fruit, night markets, and traffic. Night was very similar and so to give our senses a milder experience from all the heaviness of the previous days, we decided to go out clubbing. I had no idea, where we were going but in Bangkok you just have to have an address and try to say it to the taxi driver. Our night destination, however, was a positive surprise for me – a gay dance club is probably the friendliest place for girls.

Hopefully, this short informal report from this WSCF interregional event has been able to show you, at least, a glimpse of what it was like to be together studying and what we also recommend be worked on by WSCF, to work to represent many identities and still maintain so much in common.

Breaking the Chains: From the UN Commission on the Status of Women



Joe Nagle is the Gender interest group coordinator for WSCF-E. He works across the range of gender issues affecting the ecumenical movement in Europe and beyond including areas of language, theology, solidarity and empowerment. He is based in the north of England and enjoys rock climbing, cycling and talking long into the night about changing the world. To contact him, email: j.a.nagle@leeds.ac.uk.

Joe Nagle

I recently had the privilege of representing WSCF-E at the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (UNCSW) in New York. The UNSCW in 2010 was an opportunity for countries and nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) to review the work that had been done to fulfill an action plan instituted fifteen years ago in Beijing and share best practices with one another. I was part of a consortium of NGOs called Ecumenical Women (www.ecumenicalwomen.org) who had a three point advocacy agenda focussing on ending impunity for perpetrators of violence against women, bringing more women into positions of leadership and supporting the rights of women in the economy.

On the first day of the conference, the youth delegation, including the WSCF team were invited to lead worship. Our text was the song of Miriam from Exodus where she led the Israelites in singing to glorify God. Taking the theme of women in leadership and of overcoming barriers and breaking chains, the youth delegation of the Ecumenical Women led the congregation in joyful singing and dancing, following in the footsteps of Miriam. This was a worship of hope and of celebration. Hope that the chains would be broken, celebration at the barriers already being broken down.

At the centrepiece of the worship was a lone figure, wrapped in paper chains which had different barriers written on them which needed to be broken down. Members of the congregation were invited to come up, break these chains to



free the woman and throw them into the font, symbolizing the sea. Now what made this really powerful for me, what made this into such a statement of what advocacy is, was something which I noticed at the very end of worship. As people were dispersing, the lone woman still had some chains hanging from her. She took them, and threw them, with all the others into the font. Not many people saw this. But in an instant I understood it as a symbol of immense hope. Our role is not to completely emancipate women from the oppressive system which binds them and acts violently against them. It is to break down enough of the barriers so that the women themselves can bring about their own liberation. Advocacy is about breaking down the institutional barriers as far as they need to be broken down so that those who once needed help, can free themselves and cast all the remaining barriers into the sea.

Later that week, I also attended a side event organised by an NGO involved in social work. The speakers were describing a shift which has occurred in the way social work operates. It used to be about community organising. Social workers would be part of the community and motivate people to help one another. Recently it has moved into a case structure where social workers are often external to the community and deal with individuals. This, it was suggested, is a symptom of a world driven by consumerism. Individuals are treated as cases and the aim is to bring them to a point at which they can help themselves. What is needed, suggested one panellist, is not that people are taken to a point of self help, but rather that communities work



together. That people are brought together, not to a point of self help, but to a point of mutual aid.

One key lesson I took from the UNSCW, is that as social activists, advocates and campaigners our role is to break the chains, not off individuals, but off communities as far as they need to be broken so that those communities can then cast the remaining chains into the sea.

Submissions



As the ecumenical journal of the European Region of WSCF, Mozaik aims to provide a forum to explore and share your ideas, experiences and faith. It is a space to take up burning questions from theology, society, culture, education and other arenas; to explore Christian experience; to clear up misinformation; to provide a firm basis for dialogue and cooperation and to suggest innovative answers to the challenges we face.

We accept essays and articles about 10.000 – 15.000 characters long (including spaces), with endnotes, including some suggest readings when appropriate. For information about formatting please consult previous Mozaiks.

Mozaik is also a space to share news about your SCMs, to reflect on discipleship and culture and to express your creativity. So, we also value shorter articles, interviews, book and film reviews, reflections and reports from your SCM. Contributions of artwork, poetry, short stories and liturgy are also encouraged.

Religion, Ethics and Politics – God and the Use of Power

The next Mozaik will follow the April 2009 Theology conference in Berlin, Germany and will be published in Fall 2010.

- Would Jesus run for parliament or lead a protest?
- Religion and State – abuse of power or Kingdom of Heaven?
- Religion – means of liberation or oppression?
- Can a small group of people change the world?
- When do we stop talking the talk and start walking the walk?

This issue will examine the ways in which today's society relates to God and power through various theological and political lenses. It will be a forum for contemporary issues such as religion and state, ethics and politics, liberation theology, migration and gender to understand the relationship between Power, Religion and Political Society. The issue will be an opportunity for you to engage with the WSCF community and to grow into action for a more Just future.

If you are interested in contributing to this or any issue of Mozaik, please inform the editors as soon as possible at wscfmozaik@gmail.com. They will also be able to help you with any questions you may have.

