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Men & Religion

An Unhappy Marriage

by *Leon J. Podles*

Religious feminists have convinced everyone, or at least themselves and many clerics, that the churches are full of men who want to keep women out. I have noticed through extensive research in high school locker rooms in my younger days, and selected bars in my later years that men are interested in politics, money, football and sex, but not religion. In fact religion in general, and Christianity in particular, has for many a more than slightly effeminate aura. Is this new? How did we get this way? Is there anything that we can do about it? If we ignore it, and let the feminists reconstruct Christianity to suit their tastes, will it matter to anyone except the few who want to take Christianity seriously?

Previous centuries did not have our mania for statistics. We will find no tables in the New Testament conveniently breaking down church membership in Corinth according to age, sex, economic status, and previous attendance at idol temples. We must rely on anecdotes. In mid-eighteenth century England Dr. Samuel Johnson observed that women were more religious than men. Cotton Mather in seventeenth-century America was puzzled that his congregations were mostly women. Throughout the nineteenth century more and more people noticed and commented on this strange phenomenon. In 1890, Howard Bridgman writing in the *Dartmouth Review*, lamented that “only one young man in twenty in this country is a church member, and that seventy-five out of every hundred never attend church.” The Notre Dame Study of Catholic Parish Life discovered that in American Catholicism of the 1980s:

- More than 85 percent of those involved in ministry to the poor, sick and grieving are women, and social justice and peace efforts draw heavily on women.
- More than 80 percent of CCD teachers and sponsors of the catechumenate are women.
- More than 80 percent of the members of prayer groups are women.

- More than 75 percent of those who lead or take part in adult Bible study or religious discussions are women.
- Almost 60 percent of those involved in youth and recreational ministries are women.
- 52 percent of parish council members are female.
- 58 percent of those identified as the most influential leaders in our 36-parish survey were women.

This study shows that Catholic life is conforming to mainline Protestant patterns, in which at least two-thirds of the congregation are women. All surveys show the same pattern: in Western societies, by all measures of practice and attitude, men are less religious than women. When I attended an Ascension Thursday Johann Sebastian Bach service at a Lutheran church, there was an edifyingly large congregation. However, apart from myself and one Catholic friend, there was only one other man in the congregation of about 300. The black churches take this to an extreme; of their denominations' congregations, up to 90 percent of members are women. The levels of practice would be even lower if it were not for the influence of women on men. Father Tom Forrest, head of Evangelization 2000 in Rome, estimates that about 80 percent of active Catholics worldwide are women, and of the 20 percent who are men, many if not most are there because of the cajoling of women.

This imbalance between female and male congregants is all the more odd because the religion out of which Christianity grew and whose ethics it took over was Judaism, which was distinctly a male-centered religion. The God of the Jews, unlike any of the pagan gods, was not androgynous, combining male and female, as the gods of the pagans did. He is always spoken of as masculine. The Jews spoke of God this way because they knew that he was transcendent, a being apart from the creation. He was not like the pagan gods, who were immanent, a part of the processes of nature. He was transcendent, and therefore he was holy, separate from the world. Holiness means separation; to make something holy is to separate it from profane use. It is a male category. Psychologists and anthropologists have noticed that male mental processes and life patterns are characterized by analysis and separation, by dichotomy and alienation. The God of the Old Testament is a God of separation; he separates light from darkness, the land from the water, woman from man, the Jews from the pagans, and on the last day, the sheep from the goats, the saved from the damned.

Judaism was also male-centered in that it was a patriarchal religion, indeed *the* patriarchal religion. The Jews, according to John Miller in *Biblical Faith and Fathering*, were among the few peoples who managed to place men firmly in the family, and thereby created a true patriarchy, a society ruled by men who used their strength and wisdom to establish and nurture families. Male promiscuity and violence characterized the pagan peoples; the Jews by contrast had faithful marriages and did not destroy their children. A Jewish man thanked God three times a day that he was not born a pagan, a slave, or a woman, because these people were not obliged to the full observance of the Mosaic Law. The Law was such a heavy burden that male Jews had to be reminded that their obligation to

observe it was a privilege. The influence of women in religion was seen as largely negative. The Jews had married pagan women, who had brought idolatry into Israel. Women were too susceptible to alien spiritual influences, as we see in the story of Adam and Eve, as well as in the careers of Solomon and Ahab.

Christianity is less exclusively male-centered. The New Testament has a more positive view of the role of women. Mary is sensitive to the Holy Spirit, and conceives the Messiah. She is the only one named in the congregation at Pentecost. Lydia was the first convert in Europe. However, Christianity took over much from Judaism. The Church took over Jewish family and sexual ethics. When the New Testament writers refer to Scripture, they mean the Old Testament, and especially the ethical writings such as *Ecclesiasticus*. The twelve Apostles were parallel to the twelve sons of Israel. The names for the various ministries in the church were not set in New Testament times, and the distinction we make now between sacraments like ordination and charisms such as prophecy is not clear in the New Testament writings. But it seems that the administration of the Church, what would later be called the priesthood, was male, and therefore continued the Jewish pattern of male headship.

For over a millennium there seemed to be no difference in the participation of men and women in Christianity; at least no one remarked about it. But in the High Middle Ages something peculiar happened to the religious atmosphere. Prophecy had never completely died out in the church. But people who had been given the gift of prophecy were mostly men, and they were given short messages telling people what to do in a specific historical situation. In the High Middle Ages, most prophets were women. They set down their revelations in huge tomes, such as the *Book of Margery Kemp* and the *Liber Celestis* of St. Brigid of Sweden. Catherine Emmerich, a nineteenth century prophet, had prophecies that I believe run to several thousand pages. Women began setting the religious tone of the Catholic church. Christ was seen through their eyes.

In the New Testament, Christians, male and female, are spoken of as the sons of God because they are conformed to the image of the Son by the work of the Holy Spirit. The Church as a whole is spoken of as the Bride of Christ, in the same way that Israel as a whole was spoken of as the Spouse of Yahweh. But in these later revelations to women mystics, the *individual* Christian began to be spoken of as the Bride of Christ, and the relationship between the Christian and Christ was spoken of as a relationship between a woman and a man. Some of you may remember the Catholic Victorian hymn for communion: "And humbly I'll receive Thee,/ the Bridegroom of my soul/ No more by sin to grieve Thee,/ Or fly Thy sweet control." Such language and much of the Sacred Heart devotion are a product of the spiritual milieu that had its roots in the women mystics.

As Christ began to be seen more and more through women's eyes, he was more and more feminized. Women have a tendency to domesticate men, and do not always like the

wildness and aggressiveness of the male personality. The image of the soft Christ became more and more dominant. It is not so noticeable in the Madonna and Child, because the child is seen in still close relationship with his mother in a youthful boyishness. However, it is clear that in the paintings of the adult Christ, Christ's adult masculinity was more and more de-emphasized by post-Renaissance art. Leo Steinberg notes that the Middle Ages and the Renaissance had been rather frank about Christ's body and even his genitals, an attitude which he examines in *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and Modern Oblivion*. Steinberg is slightly mistaken, however. It was not precisely Christ's sexuality, but his masculinity, that painters were interested in. His genitals are of course the most obvious sign of his masculinity. The artists used a symbolic language of gestures and juxtapositions to explore the meaning of Christ's masculinity. The connection that the artists were interested in, even in the paintings of Mary and her child, is that of masculinity with sacrifice.

Both Catholicism and Protestantism were affected by this tendency to feminize Christ and the Christian. The pietist Jesus is also soft. Puritan sermons used the dominant metaphor of the Christian as the Bride of Christ, and the relationship between Christ and the Christian was that of a man and a woman. The Puritan Foxcroft in a funeral sermon spoke of the grave as a happy place in which "the Saints shall be impregnated" and from which they would arise "as some happy Bride from her Bed of Perfumes, call'd up to meet her royal Bridegroom."

This internal change in the Church also was re-enforced by external changes. The churches in Europe and America were largely disestablished in the aftermath of the French and American revolutions. In America, which has been the most studied, and probably in Europe also, religion was transferred from the public to the private side of life. Almost all societies divide life into a public male sphere and a private female sphere. Religion had belonged to both prior to the nineteenth century. For Constantine and Charlemagne, much as for the pagan emperors, religion was a matter of public policy and therefore a proper concern of men. The great mystical movement of the twelfth century was dominated by the Cistercians, many of whom were warriors who had entered the monastery. They recast the Arthurian legends, which are replete with motifs of male initiation, to convey their own quest, in which the Grail they sought was the uncreated grace of the Holy Spirit. But in modern times religion has been confined to the private and therefore to the female sphere of life, and is foreign to the male dynamic of quest and initiation, which finds outlets elsewhere.

Men found their spiritual sustenance in the fraternal movements. The thousands of Masonic temples and Independent Order of Odd Fellows halls and Knights of Pythias Lodges that dot every American small town are relics of that movement. The fraternal orders had the primary purpose of conducting initiation rituals. These rituals were drawn from puberty rites of primitive societies, such as the American Indian. Male initiation rituals have the primary purpose of withdrawing boys from the safety and comfort of the

feminine world of their mothers and confronting them with pain and the danger of death. This ritual, if it works, gives boys a new personality that drives them to sacrifice themselves in work, hunting and war, to provide for society. The fraternal orders used these rituals, without the bloodshed that primitive rites often incorporated. The modern American lodge members were all male, and kept their rituals secret from women. Through darkness, mysterious actions, speeches about pain and death, and even occasional confrontations with skeletons, men were brought to escape shallowness and to realize the seriousness of life. Men loved it, and flocked to these fraternal orders all throughout the nineteenth century, seeking initiation after initiation. Charles Grandison Finney, the preacher who began the Second Great Awakening, the wave of revivals that set the evangelical tone of American Protestantism, was a Freemason, and had gone through these initiations. His conversion experience in 1821 closely resembles a fraternal initiation. The anguish and the hell-fire and brimstone sermons of the revivals were a change from the calm rationality, unitarianism, and universalism of the older churches.

The clergy in nineteenth-century America were not always happy with this arrangement. They felt marginalized, and even their economic security was affected. They made their alliance with women, and tried to use women to influence public life indirectly. Their motto was “the hand that rocks the cradle rules the world.” In early nineteenth-century America, 80 to 90 percent of church members were women. The revivals of the Second Great Awakenings seem to have been at least in part designed to bring men into the church. The percentage of men in the church after the revivals was higher than before but women continued to predominate numerically.

After the turn of the twentieth century, Christian laymen began a crusade to bring men into the church, the Men and Religion Forward Movement, which reached its peak in 1911-1912. Gail Bederman, in her study of the movement, notes that “the messages were often traditional, but the method of presentation was highly unorthodox. As often as possible, organizers bought ads on the sport pages, where Men and Religion messages competed for consumers attention with ads for automobiles, burlesque houses, and whiskey. . . . And the entire revival, from beginning to end, was occasionally depicted as one big advertising campaign. For example, Collier’s announced that the Movement’s experts ‘have taken hold of religion, and are boosting it with the fervor and publicity skills which a gang of salesmen would apply to soap that floats or suits that wear.’” It stressed the image of Jesus as the Successful Businessman, the Super Salesman. In the National Cathedral in Washington, I came across a memorial tablet to an Episcopalian worthy, whose life was summed up, not as a “Christian,” or “Sinner,” or “Devoted Father and Husband,” but as “Investment Banker.” Despite all these oddities and Babbitry, the movement to a large extent worked. All of the churches experienced an increase in male membership, the Episcopal church most of all. But even after all the effort, men still remained a minority in all churches.

The results of the Men and Religion Forward movement died out in the 1950s. Men

went about their masculine affairs in business, government, the military, science, and left the Church to women and too often to men who had not developed a very clear masculine identity. The condition that religious congregations tend to in our society seems to be about two-thirds women, one-third men, with most of the men being very young or very old. Of active members, 80 to 90 percent are women.

Is this a problem? Clergymen don't seem to mind it. Most religious feminists are happy with this arrangement, and many would prefer to see even fewer men. Patrick Arnold, a liberal Jesuit, writes about the misandry, a hatred for men and masculinity, that is the dominant attitude of liberal Catholics and Protestants. But I take the scarcity of men to be desirable in itself, and it may have bad consequences both for the church and society. Participation in Christianity has something to do with salvation, unless the authors of the Gospels are totally mistaken.

A church that excludes a part of humanity misses the fullness of the Christian message. The failure of the Jews to convert impoverished the Church, and tended to cut it off from its semitic roots. The split between Greek and Latin Christianity hurt both. As new nations and cultures enter the Church, the Church is often better able to see the gospel. The emphasis on spiritual warfare in the Gospels has been largely explained away or ignored. The Africans have a vivid sense of the reality of the spiritual world. When one Protestant missionary newly trained in biblical criticism tried to preach to a tribe, its members thanked him and said that was all very well, but they needed deliverance from the evil spirits that came at night to torment them. If there is an African, or Indian, or Chinese perspective on Christianity that reveals some more of the gospel, a fortiori there must be a male perspective which is necessary to understanding the gospel. If men do not participate equally in the life of the church (and they don't), the church will fail to see the reality of the gospel as it is addressed to men.

Society may also suffer. As I noted earlier, Judaism inserted men fully into the family, and a Christianity took over Jewish sexual and familial ethics. But now the story of divorce and desertion is familiar. In our country, half of all marriages end in divorce. Most children grow up for at least part of their lives in single-parent households, that is, in homes headed by mothers. In huge sections of our cities fathers are simply not to be seen. Crime and violence are the inevitable result. The same thing is happening in South America because men do not take religion or the family very seriously.

There are far worse things that can happen and that have happened because of this alienation of men from Christianity. Men need religion as much as women. If they do not find it in Christianity, they may well look elsewhere. The totalitarian ideologies of our century, especially fascism and nazism, provided a male religion. The Italian Futurists trumpeted their disdain for Christianity, women and peace, and sang of the glories of war and adventure. The Futurist Manifesto proclaimed, "We will glorify war—the world's

only hygiene—militarism, patriotism, the destructive gesture of the anarchist, beautiful ideas worth dying for, and scorn for women.” The Futurists became fascists. The Nazis organized Germany as a *Männerbund*, a society that understood men’s inner life and provided for it. Hitler and the rituals of the Nazi party provided a substitute for the generation of fathers that had been lost in the First World War.

Can anything be done? Yes. First the medical maxim *primum non nocere* must be followed. Don’t feminize the Church even more, by such things as women clergy, and so-called inclusive language. Beyond that there are three types of action that can be taken.

First, a solid theological foundation of the roles of male and female has to be developed. This will not be easy, because most church leaders—Catholic and Protestant alike—and those to whom they listen explicitly reject this project, preferring a confusion of gender roles, which allows women to slide into areas previously assigned to men. However the Scriptures, anthropology and psychology have a great deal of material for this project.

The Old Testament especially has much to say, mostly about the characteristic faults of men and women. However, the lineaments of a true patriarch shine through the flawed figures of the Old Testament. There are many models, from Abraham on, and much practical wisdom for fathers in the Hebrew Scriptures. Christ is the fulfillment of the male role. He is the new Adam, as Mary is the new Eve. A man is a boy who has successfully escaped from narcissism and dependence on his mother so that he can take responsibility for life, and give rather than receive. Christ takes responsibility for that which he has no responsibility. He bears the sins of the world. The male, the Old Testament realized, is someone who is destined for bloody sacrifice. The sign of the covenant is circumcision. The animals that were chosen for sacrifice were male. Abraham was told to sacrifice Isaac, and every first-born son was destined for sacrifice, but God in his mercy allowed an animal to be sacrificed instead. In Christ all these hints were fulfilled. He came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.

The apostles were also joined with him in this destiny. To Peter, Christ said: Feed my lambs, and accept crucifixion. To Paul, he said: Preach me, and I will show how much you must suffer for me. Authority in the New Testament is not self-aggrandizing, but a ministry of sacrifice. The apostles and their successors in the episcopate and priesthood were destined for martyrdom. The normal fate of a bishop in the apostolic Church was to be martyred. For Christians martyrs were the new athletes, the new soldiers. Even women, when they were martyred, were mystically transformed into men. Before her death in the arena in the year 202, Perpetua had a vision of her martyrdom as a gladiatorial contest. Angels come to her and change her into a man—“*Facta sum masculus*,” she explains. The early Church felt the connection between masculinity and sacrifice so strongly it found it hard to imagine a woman as a martyr.

Anthropologists, such as David Gilmore in his *Manhood in the Making*, have realized that the identity of a man is not a necessary result of biology; the identity of a woman is a natural development, to a far greater extent. Boys must be trained into becoming men. What they must learn is that they are expendable, that they must be willing to suffer and die for the community. Men will do this. They not only do it, they expect it. In war, men will easily sacrifice themselves for their friends, and will go to death because they know that if they refuse others must go in their place.

The second step is to develop a spirituality that relates Christianity to the public world of work and politics, the area of life to which men devote their time and energy. The monastic fathers were always suspicious of overspiritualization and emphasized the necessity of work. Much of the transforming energy of the Reformation came from the Reformers' stress that the Christian life was not confined to the monastery, but could be lived in the home and workshop. In this century, Opus Dei has tried to develop such a spirituality for Christians, both Catholic and Protestant, who want to live a holy life while leading a life fully in the world. Christianity also has a role in the public sphere. That religion and politics don't mix is a false saying. They do. Their proper relationship in our society is a matter of controversy and I do not intend to discuss it here. Richard John Neuhaus' book *The Naked Public Square* is an excellent introduction to the debate.

The third type of action is reforming the internal life of the church. Patrick Arnold in his book, *Warriors, Wildmen and Kings: Masculine Spirituality and the Bible*, has some excellent practical suggestions. On the subject of the liturgy he says ". . . Butterfly, Banner and Balloon Extravaganzas severely alienated many men. The most saccharine outbreaks of forced liturgical excitement featured clattering dancers floating down church aisles like wood-nymphs, goofy pseudo-rites forced on the congregation with almost fascist authoritarianism, and a host of silly *schticks* usually accompanied by inane music." Arnold observes that a "liturgy that appeals to men possesses a quality the Hebrews called *kabod* ('glory') and the Romans *gravitas* ('gravity'); both words at root mean 'weightiness' and connote a sense of dignified importance and seriousness."

Beyond these three areas, there is a more profound problem. The essence of Christianity consists in a relationship with God in Christ. The only way we have a saving knowledge of God is in Christ. The relationship of a woman to a man is different from the relationship of a man to a man. The Christ, the Risen Lord of the universe, is the same person as Jesus the son of Joseph. The Christ is forever a man, and forever bears his wounds, the sign of his battle and his initiation into suffering. The Lamb stands forever before God's throne as one that was slain. The relationship of a man to Christ is not precisely that of a friend; it is more like that of a comrade, a fellow soldier and sufferer in the warfare of life. Christ died for all, in the supreme gesture of self-sacrifice that we see analogies of on the battlefield.

Why don't men feel that Christ is their comrade? Why don't they feel that spirit of self-sacrifice for him and for his cause that they feel in earthy wars?

One reason is that modern Christianity tends to ignore the reality of spiritual warfare. In a shallow rationalism, biblical scholars have tried to explain the New Testament's theme of the battle between Christ and Satan as mythologizing. This is simply false. There is a spiritual warfare, which takes many forms, and there are real personal powers of spiritual evil. They can attack both the soul and the body. In *The End of the Modern World*, Romano Guardini noted that there was something truly and literally diabolical about the evils of our century. In medieval legends the Antichrist has crematories. As I noted, the Africans have a lively sense of the reality of the unseen world. Ancient Christians did also. John Wimber and the school of Power Evangelism has begun transforming missions; it is not liberation theology, but deliverance from the kingdom of evil spirits for which the masses of the third world thirst. Pentecostalism is making Latin America Protestant faster than central Europe was changed in the first Reformation.

An easy universalism, a feeling that all people will be saved, a feeling that all religions are about the same, also will prevent men from taking religion seriously, because such a religion is not serious. The martyrs and ascetics of the Church knew that sin was real and that suffering in atonement for it is an inescapable part of our vocation to pick up our cross daily and follow Christ.

As part of our participation in the sufferings of Christ, a revival of asceticism is needed. The ascetical practices of the Church, prayer of the body (kneeling, prostrations, pilgrimages), fasting, bodily mortifications, have been watered down for centuries. In the early Church the sacrament of penance was sometimes given only once in a lifetime, and the public penance could last for years. Now fasting has just about disappeared. An easy, cheap grace is preached almost everywhere. However, in the southwest United States, the Penitente Brotherhoods not only survive but flourish. These are groups of Catholic men, of both Hispanic and Indian descent, who join brotherhoods to do penance for the sins of the world. The penances are not light. They include scourging and reenacting the crucifixion by being tied to a cross. By joining these brotherhoods, the young men undergo a rite as severe as those of puberty rituals, but in a Catholic context. They learn that to be a man is to be willing to suffer and die for others. They learn compassion by suffering. They become community leaders, and assist the poor of a community that was abandoned by the Spanish and robbed by the Anglos. Neither the Catholic hierarchy nor Protestant missionaries have much use for them. But the brotherhoods have preserved Catholicism and community amid poverty and desolation. No one seeing the public penances of these men can think that religion is soft, womanish, or effeminate. They are true athletes of Christ, like the Desert Fathers of the fourth century.

The concept of sonship must be recovered in popular piety and preaching. It almost

disappeared after the women mystics of the Middle Ages set the tone for the Church. However, it is extremely important in the New Testament. The only modern spiritual writer I am aware of who made the sonship of Christians the center of his teaching was Msgr. Escriva, the founder of Opus Dei.

However, these are but a few voices crying in the wilderness. A church made up largely of women will be a church open to the vagaries of feminism, and feminism seems to be locus for the rejection of central church teachings on sexuality and on Christ. Approval of homosexuality is the semi-official position of the middle management of the Roman Catholic church in America as well as the liberal Protestant churches. A Church that has a strong aura of effeminacy and homosexuality is not going to attract many men. The rejection of the doctrine of the uniqueness of Christ is also widespread. Because Christ was a man, he cannot for some feminists be the unique revelation of God. It makes them gag to worship a man, as they must if they are Christians. They get around this difficulty, at least those who are on the church payroll and need to maintain a veneer of Christianity, by adopting Hindu categories, by making Jesus but one example of the Christ-principle, an avatar of the divine, not, as in classical theology, the second person of the Trinity, the Father's Eternal Word made flesh.

It suits the temperament of the times. All religions are equal, all founders are manifestations of the divine, Jesus and Buddha and Mary Baker Eddy and whoever the believer feels attracted to. Usually it ends up in self-worship. Bridgman in 1890 said that a religion for women only is no religion. He should have phrased it differently. A religion almost exclusively for women may be a religion, but it is not Christianity.

This article is based on a talk given at State College, Pennsylvania, to the Thomas More Association in 1992.

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