

LECTURE #6

Christianity: New Testament and Patristic

unfortunately, all accounts of Jesus sayings and doings stem from memories edited decades after his death by followers whose interpretation was colored by the belief that he was the messiah.

thus it is hard to get to Jesus own unvarnished views about women, however, the very fact that he is recorded as treating women the same as men in his relationships to them in a very patriarchal age shows he was unique in his attitude, even tho colored by the gospel writers.

there is nothing in Jesus view of women, either words or actions, that could be labeled antifemale, misogynistic, or sexist.

the parables, in fact, reflect a balance of masculine and feminine concerns that even by todays standards is quite remarkable.

for example: the lost sheep (male) is paralleled by the lost coin (female).

he drew from both sexes' experience and used his healing power on both men and women w/o concern, even for the ritual impurity of the woman with a hemmorage.

He lauded both men and women for their faith.

he showed himself to be free of the law on women's account, as much as on men's.

since women were definitely second-class citizens in the

Judaism of Jesus' day, his democracy was quite striking.

Jesus even had close women friends.

In John 11, He raised Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha for their sake and friendship

in Luke 10, Jesus supports Mary's right to listen to his teaching without being concerned about helping Martha her sister do the housework w/o failing to appreciate Martha's busyness.

Mary Magdalene was close to Jesus and in fact the first one to see him after the resurrection.

since Jesus said 'his own' would recognize his voice, it seems doubly significant that in John Jesus first appears to Mary Magdalene and she recognizes him when he calls her by name.

since Jesus 'own' are those most intimate disciples who gathered with him for the Last supper, this Johannine episode seems to mean that women such as Mary could be as close to Jesus as those who comprised "the twelve"--the new tribes of Israel.

John 4 records Jesus talking to a samaritan woman, considered 'a menstruant from the cradle' to Judaism of his day. he makes her the herald of the good news to the samaritans because of her faith and honesty.

he is clearly no respecter of conventional taboos.

Jesus treats men and women simply as individuals who need his help, or as co-workers, or friends.

he offers women no separate but equal way of works; he compiles no segregating list of feminine virtues.

in the face of considerable opposition Jesus associated with the outcasts and marginal people of his day: the poor, sinners, tax collectors, lepers, --and women.

It is clear that Jesus preached to women, admitted them to discipleship, and accepted their hospitality and help,

it is also clear that authority, in Jesus' view, was for service, power for leadership in ministering to others' needs.

in the later church after the 1st generation
church leaders and women had access to priestly functions, or
local leadership. ~~and~~ This has stamped into the church
the idea of male leadership.

in matters of marriage, divorce, and remarriage, Jesus applies his stringent standards to men and women evenhandedly, thereby removing many of the Jewish male's prerogatives.

the disciples were astonished saying "if such was the case of a man with his wife, it is not expedient to marry" (Matt. 19:10)

Jesus makes adultery not a matter of abusing another man's property, but a sin for which man and woman are equally personally responsible.

thus it appears that Jesus followers were serving themselves as much as the masters memory when they chose to exclude women from equal access to community leadership.

under Paul's urging, they could "innovate" and include non-Jews on equal footing with Jews, they could have innovated to admit women also, but didn't.

The book of Acts shows that in the beginning there was a certain idyllic egalitarianism, with women and men working together.

women are the first to open their homes to the persecuted, instruct newcomers, and were gifted in prophecy and counted among the saints.

they also regularly studied the scriptures (17)

Paul

what Happened to make women second class church members?

the cause is complex. most writers agree that the Hellenistic, and frequently Gnostic, environment, which suspected matter, the body, and women, combined with Jewish patriarchalism (and the self-advantage operative in most social bias) to make Christian men fear women and insist on their subjugation.

Paul's treatment of women is a good example of the tensions between the early, developing Christian theology and its cultural milieu.

in I Cor 11 Paul upbraids women for praying and prophesying with unveiled heads.

commentators note that Corinth was a hotbed of Gnostic (secret knowledge) excesses.

thus, removing the veil may have been announcing her gnostic leanings.

thus Paul says "get back in the fold" but nowhere does he say she cannot prophesy.

this reflects Pauls Jewish sensibilities since in rabbinic morality, deliberate removal of the veil was grounds for divorce.

paul never forbids women to prophecy, nor denies that they can be as spirit filled as men.

more disturbing is the fact men do not have to cover their heads because they are the image and glory of God, while women are the glory of men (11:7)

this has been a solid plank in the platform of male supremacy thru Christian history, although it is balanced by the assertion (11:11,12) that "In the Lord" men and woman are interdependent.

Galations 3:28 is a theological text from Paul of importance which states that "there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female." in Christ.

thus, both men and women are one in the new dispensation, equally "heirs according to the promise" (3:29)

this is an eschatological or "end time" situation brought about by Christ's death and resurrection and his eminent return to complete history (parousia)

Paul is not always clear and logical

in I Cor 7:36-38, he praises celibate cohabitation, because

he thought it especially appropriate to the end-time.

certainly he considered virginity a gift of the Spirit.

at any rate, it is clear that "in Christ" historically, there was indeed "male and female" and tht one cause of this was that Paul and the other early church leaders, did not build their intuitions of a transsexual equality into women's full participation in church authority, office and life.

a generation after Paul, between 90-110 CE, the pastoral letters were written, (I and II Tim and Titus) along with an insert into Paul's letter to the Cor (14:33b-36) which once and for all put women into a subordinate position within the Church.

In I Tim. 2:9-15, it says women should:

adorn themselves modestly and sensibly in seemly apparel, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or costly attire but by good deeds, as befits women who profess religion. Let a woman learn in silence with all submissiveness. I permit no woman to teach or have authority over men; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. Yet woman will be saved through bearing children, if she continues in faith and love and holiness, with modesty.

the great Christian theme of Eve's (woman's) responsibility for original sin began here.

I Cor 14 in which Paul admonishes women to be silent in church is linguistically from this same period.

It is inserted in a section on prophecy where Paul is wanting order but the language is that of about 50 years later.

whats going on?

the later church is trying to give Pauline authority to the idea that women are to be silent in church, thus the insertion.

Paul's letters were all published about 70 CE under a cover letter which is believed to be the book of Ephesians, written by a bishop in Ephesus. thats another story.

however, in the letter to the Ephesians the attitude of women being subject to their husbands as to the Lord is found. for the husband is head of the wife as Christ is head of the church.

thus even by this time the change was coming so that "some Christians were more equal than others" became the rule.

the books of I and II Peter written c. 95 CE from Rome again have this same attitude.

thus, very shortly after Paul's death around 64 CE in Rome, the church went rapidly back to the "status quo" of the society in its attitudes towards women.

Patristic and Medieval Christianity

Gnosticism, which caused Paul trouble in Corinth, and to which the gospel of John is addressed, continued to plague the church in the age of the "Fathers" (2nd -5th cent.)

its dualism, (matter is evil, spirit is good) wnet by many names, but usually it took one of two forms--either a rigid asceticism that despised the flesh, or a libertine

self-indulgence that scorned morality, and made salvation a question of privileged election.

in the main, the church fathers condemned both these attitudes, teaching that all creation is essentially good and that salvation entails self-control and good deeds.

they were ascetic themselves, however, because they believed that "fallen" nature qualified creation's goodness and needed correctiver discipline.

unfortunately, this led them on more that a few occasions to depreciate the body, sex, and women, and so to hinder their own efforts at distancing Christianity from Gnosticism.

as far as the feminine aspects of religion, the fathers were inclined towards misogyny by the Gnostic trend towards incorporating a female principle within the godhead.

in some Gnostic trinities, for instance, the divine persons say, "I am the Father," "I am the Mother", "I am the Son".

many Gnostic groups drew the implications of this androgynous symbolism in their organizational lives, allowing women parity in leadership roles.

Tertullian, a 2nd cent. African leader, castigated these Gnostic women as hereitcal, bold, and immodest, because they presumed to prophesy, teach, exorcise and baptize.

unlike some of his orthodox contemporaries, he did not forbid deaconesses to teach, so long as they were under strict male supervision.

in reply to Tertullian, the Gnostics argued that conversion dissolved sexuality.

their own promiscuity often gave the lie to this argument, it exerted considerable influence on Christian piety.

Perpetua, for instance, a 22 year old married woman and prophetess, had a visions before her martyrdom, .

Perpetua's document is the first by a woman circulated in the church.

she was martyred in 202 or 203 in Carthage.

she protested against a society that handed out injustice and oppression, and the treatement of women as deferential wives and daughters and as machines to replenish the population.

she believed that she was liberated from the law of the Romans and the expectations of her culture by God.

her loyalty to Christ Jesus enabled her to transcend her identity as a female or a citizen of a particular nation.

she rejected the domestic norms to which she is expected to conform. including giving up her baby.

she has visions of her salvation coming to her thru her fight with the powers of evil, aided only by Christ and not by the official male clergy.

in one of her visions of battling the forces of evil, she sees herself as a man who is stripped of his clothing and ubbed with oil for combat. in the same vision she sees herself as the peaceful daughter who is given the branch of victory.

thus, Perpetua represents the Christian who is freed from society's expectations of women and men.

her account was circulated widely in the early churches for purposes of instruction and inspiration.

basilicas were dedicated to her, and Augustine of Hippo preached sermons on her.

however, her memory faded as the growing power of male clergy considered the writings of a woman inadequate and improper for official church use.

Sex was a matter of unease during the patristic age.

as part of creation, the body, sex, women and marriage all had to be good, but as a matter of experience, sex was a powerful drive, often in conflict with the spiritual untroubledness that the early Christians associated with holiness.

from the male point of view, women incited this drive, so women were at least problematic, if not per se evil.

the best way to defuse sex and keep women at a distance was to promote celibacy.

thus, sexual abstinence and virginity became the higher way.

instances of the early glorification of celibacy and concomitant depreciation of marital intercourse fairly abound: only unmarried Christians could be baptized in the Syrian church.

Origen and other early Christians drew praise for castrating themselves (they also drew condemnation);

marital relations were said to lessen the efficacy of prayer.

Tertullian taught that a failing in chastity was worse than death.

of women Tertullian said she is "the devil's gateway," "the first deserter of the divine law," because of whom "even the Son of God had to die".

Grudgingly he permitted marriage (he was married himself) but widows who remarried would "harvest fruits well fitting the last days, dripping breasts, stinking wombs, crying babies."

Clement of Alexandria while affirming both marriage and celibacy, preferred the later.

in his view, marriage was solely for procreation which ought to be accomplished without feeling.

married men should practice continence, and heaven would free both men and women, whom basically he thought equal, from sexuality, and women ought to hold themselves severely to modesty in clothing and behavior.

in the 3rd cent., there was a marked increase in vowed celibacy and a heavier theme that women are evil.

when Christianity was declared the religion of Rome by Constantine in 312, the red blood of martyrdom gave way to the white of virginity.

John Chrysostom who was influential in the eastern church, urged

virginity because marriage was only for procreation, and the world was filled (about 382).

thus marriage was solely a concession to sin.

a first marriage was better than visiting prostitutes, but remarriage indicated stupidity.

in fact, a widow who remarried would never be happy, since men like "what nobody else has owned and used."

he blamed women for the sins of David and Solomon and whipped himself into disgusting descriptions of the female as a storehouse of spittle and phlegm, reminiscent of Buddhist meditation masters.

fathers should keep their sons from women as from the flames of fire.

Jerome in the west heaped lavish praise on virgins.

he liked women, and gathered them around him in convents in the holy land.

he found his own celibacy onerous, mastering Hebrew partly as a distraction and discipline.

for the same reason he advocated strict fasting and bodily discomfort, for while "God hardly delights in the rumbling of our intestines, these are necessary to preserve chastity."

he discouraged women from marriage by describing in lurid detail the pain, hard work, and intimate abuse they would suffer at a husband's side.

Augustine was the most influential of the western fathers and his

ideas are found today mostly in the protestant churches,
especially the more conservative ones.

he said of women: "I know nothing which brings the manly mind
down from the heights more than a womans' caresses and that
joining of bodies w/o which one cannot have a wife."

morital pleasure is always a venial sin, and if procreation
is not possible, as after menopause, it is a mortal sin.

thus a man should charish his wife's soul but hate her body as
an enemy.

before his famous conversion, he had a concubine and a son
(12 when he converted.)

his conversion led him to find woman no full image of God.
Only joined to man, who is her head, is woman in the image of
God.

thus Eve could not be the primary agent of the fall, and
woman's function in the transmission of original sin, which
Augustine located in procreation, is to prompt venereal desire.

Thomas Aquinas (13th Cent.) whose influence is felt especially in
the Roman Catholic church today.

thomas seems free of the sexual obsessions that perturbed the
fathers, but he looked on the female as a misbegotten male (like
Aristotle did)

(ironically, its the other way around)

thus she is naturally subject to the male, and lower than a
slave, whose subjection is unnatural.

defloration corrupts the woman's body, which is only an

incubator for the sperm anyway, since the sperm contains the entire embryo in potentia.

contraception is sinful, therefore, because it vitiates the ends for which the sperm naturally works.

even worse, Thomas found women to be morally weaker and more adulterous than men.

thus, women and marriage both suffered from the churches promotion of celibacy.

the office of deaconess was found in the first church and lingered on in the east longer than the west.

this is because the east was more sexually segregated and needed them for such functions as females' baptism, which was done naked by total immersion.

so eastern deaconesses instructed female catechumens, anointed the baptized with oil, visited sick women, prepared the bodies of the dead, and conducted the physical examinations that ensured when a virgin was accused of having broken her vows.

Deaconesses dropped from the west in the 11th cent. (in the east it was the 14th cent.)

there place being taken by consecrated virgins (nuns)

a woman who wanted to become a nun had to have her father's consent, or if married, her husband's consent.

this, in fact, was the alternative to divorce.

many wealthy women took refuge in convents, and female

monasteries in general were an object of charitable almsgiving.

in some convents a superb religious life flourished, others were little more than storage bins for surplus gentlewomen.

with time convent life became more circumscribed and constricted, as male authorities exercised increasingly close control.

they pressured nuns to forget they were women.

the ideology at work was from such ideas as "virgins are men in mind, even if women in body," and medieval attitudes such as Aquinas' that males correlate with the rational and spiritual, females with the sexual and material.

when a woman took religious vows, she was thought called upon to negate her essential nature.

for Aquinas, women's nature also rendered them unfit to be priests, and they might not prophesy publicly because they had no authority, might incite men to lust, and lacked wisdom.

it is not surprising that priests regularly disdained females.

St. Gertrude, for ex, had her writings praised by a clerical friend as, "not feminine, that is, no contemptible."

in spite of this, Gertrude, Mechtilde, Juliana of Norwich, and other medieval nuns left writings of high scholarship and sensitivity, prefiguring Teresa of Avila, the Spanish 16th cent. mystic, who was declared a doctor of the church in the 1970s.

women's education was not promoted by the church so convents were not giving quality education.

a nun's education had more to do with being of the upper social classes than being a nun.

as early as the 6th cent., authorities pushed for a cloister ("seperation") of all nuns so strict that they could never leave, even to go next door to church.

no men but priests and repairmen could enter, no laywomen could reside there; and no child could be taught or housed there.

the slogan was "either a husband or a wall"

breaking cloister could mean flogging, fasting, or excommunication.

there were a few women nuns who practiced an active religious life before the reformation (Hospitalers, tertiaries, and Beguines) but they were marginal.

Dominican and Franciscan nuns, had to be cloistered.

popes Boniface VIII (1298) and Gregory XIII (1572) insisted on full cloister.

Pius V (1566) made it a matter of papal excommunication--one only he himself could lift--if a nun left her cloister w/o permission.

written permission was available in case of epidemics, leprosy, and fire.

there were women abbesses during the middle ages, some of whom held authority over men, but this was only a slight dent in

the patriarchal power structure.

cult of the Virgin Mary

Mary crystallizes the ambivalence in women's image, for she is both virgin and mother--a trick that none of her sisters could manage.

she was portrayed erotically as "coveted by God" and praised with images from the Song of Songs.

she was also seen in folk religion as a motherly protector of sinners against Jesus' wrath.

in one tale an abbess who was out of her convent for two years with her lover would pray to Mary each day for protection.

Docilely, Mary covered for her in the monastery and hid her sin--until one day she forgot to offer the prayer.

with a contradiction of images, popular piety thought of the Virgin as both the impassible Queen of Heaven (a title, you'll recall, also applied to astarte), and the mother under the cross, nearly insane with grief.

in medieval times she became "our mother".

(earlier theology had stressed that she was theotokos--the godbearer) which meant that in lay imagination, she was often fused or confused with the divinity.

overall, the veneration of Mary aimed at someone so supernal that ordinary women's image and status was little helped by it.

this is all to clear in the medieval persecution of withces.

Persecution of Witches

despite official condemnation of the very notion of witches in both the 8th and 11th cent, in 1484, Pope Innocent VIII appointed the Dominican priests Jacob Sprenger and Henry Kramer as inquisitors to lead a war against witchcraft.

they wrote a book called The Malleus Maleficarum (the Hammer against Witches) and it was published in 1486.

it is a treasury of medieval imaginings about the characteristics, habits, and techniques of the evil, sexually insatiable female given over to Satan.

Social historians postulate that the cause of such deep anxiety as the inquisitors' was the upheaval going back to the 13th cent, which had involved conflicts with several strongly Gnostic groups, and disasters, such as the Black Death (c. 1350)

this demanded scapegoats--marginal women and Jews proved to be the readiest at hand.

between the 13th and 18th cent, hundreds of thousands, perhaps even a million, "witches" lost their lives, most of them women.

the Malleus is dedicated to the proposition that woman is an evil of nature, painted with fair colors.

she is naturally stupid, lacking in faith, and lustful for Satanic intercourse.

a witch can cause impotence by freezing or stealing male organs.

witches perform abortions in which "little by little. .
.fragments of the head and feet and hands" gush out.

where did they get this lore?

largely from confessions extracted under torture..

it is a sad commentary on the limits of the 16th cent.
reformation that it did nothing for marginal women, who continued
to be racked and burned, even in the New world.

Greek Orthodox

in the East, the development of Orthodoxy, which after 1054
seperated from Rome, had its own variations on women under
patriarchal religion.

from the earliest centuries, Greek Christianity held for both
consecrated celibacy and sacramental marriage.

either vocation, according to Gregory of Nyssa, can heal the
sexual divisions caused by the fall, and restore the image of
God.

thus deaconesses ministered to the faithful until the 14th
cent, and the devoted wife and mother became in popular piety a
type of the justified soul.

in dealing with Eve, orthodoxy mitigated somewhat the western
tendency to think of her as a debased proto-woman.

the hymns of Romanos, for instance (6th cent.) make Eve the
"mother" of Mary, and the first to understand the meaning of the

Incarnation.

Orthodoxy also spoke positively of Mary Magdalene, and in its sophiology (ie, speculation about wisdom--Sophia), it somewhat androgynized the deity, by tending to give the Spirit womanly attributes.

this did not inhibit a significant misogyny.

John Chrysostom, already mentioned, was very influential in the East and one finds his spirit in later Russian maxims: "It is better to suffer from fever than to be mastered by a bad wife,".

widows were pressured to enter the convent, or at least to live celibate lives hidden away, devoting themselves to prayers for their husbands' salvation.

Men were cautioned about believing their wives' promises to take the veil and so leaving money for their support in the convent.

"She, cunning woman, getting hold of her husband's possessions, like a whore, remarries."

as in the west, the cult of Mary did not shield women from such misogynistic attitudes.

the Eastern bishops had pushed for the theotokos doctrine at the Council of Ephesus (431) and their successors taught that Mary was ever virgin--before, during, and after Jesus' birth

many feast days celebrated events in Mary's life, and

miracles (for ex: abating a plague) regularly were credited to her intercession.

tho the Virgin had been assumed bodily into hjeaven at her death, relics of her body (hair, nail parings, and such), as well as of her clothes were displayed in many churches, as they were in the West.

Eastern Marian iconography became a high art form.

it was popularly thought that an icon could be so fused with Mary's holy presence as to weep or bleed when witness to suffering or blasphemy.

still, in the East, Mary remained very much a complete human being, so that Pius IX's proclamation of the Immaculate Conception (1854), which excepted Mary from original sin, was rejected by the East.

Wife beating was commonly practiced in Russia and the east.

husbands were cautioned not to use iron or wooden rods, and not to strike eyes, face, or chest, but they clearly had the right, even the duty, to chastise their subordinates "for the good of their souls".

in the West, Medieval town law gave husbands the right to flog their wives, and a violent popular attitude taught that if women crossed their husbands, they might expect, quite literally, to have their faces smashed in.