

The Changing Gender roles in early Christianity

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Abstract: The research paper intends to study how religion influences women in their gender makeup & the roles played in the larger society. There exists conflict between genders which leads to oppression of women in religious domains of the church. Culture sets boundaries engulfing them in chains of misery which make women forcefully submit & subjugated in their approach, specifically looking the time period of first century when men of the Christian faith were writing the scriptures of the bible & worked alongside women in the church, the various religious constrains women are put through in order so that she plays the role of a wife, mother, daughter according to the frameworks society lays down for her. Women in the early church history were part of the silenced lot; they played their role alongside the men and many other men in the ministry & church life participating wherever given a chance to making a partnership along with the men in God's divine order. The paper intends to look at women's participation in the church, her equation with men folk, cultural influences of the mindset during the Church cultures in that age, the research paper has degree of understanding & will give clarity in the mind of the people in society at large, also the research paper intends to have a feminist understanding & an interpretive approach of spirituality& sexuality on women in the Christian religion from an academic lens.

I. THE CHANGING GENDER ROLES IN EARLY CHRISTIANITY:

The history of women in early Christianity has been subjected to evidential change if we look at the history of women in ancient Christianity centuries ago. Over the centuries, women's role in early Christianity waxed and waned as the political structure of Western European society went from tribal to kingdoms. Currently, lay women and scholars have sought to recover and return to the original tenets of Christ's messages. Sectarian interests in the last five hundred years have also played their part in the roller coaster role of women in the Christian church. Most scholars look at philosophy, heresy and sociology for an explanation of this Transformational imagery and explain the imagery as the liberation of women from a patriarchal society or as indicative of the empowerment of women to teach and preach. Much of this symbolic language and transformational imagery has been examined by scholars and has been shown to be reflective of Biblical imagery and Jewish and early Christian understanding of apocalypse and eschatology. The transformational imagery specific to changing sexes, the language and imagery of women being male, however, receives little contextual scholarly attention and has for the most part been left to elucidation through the prism of modern concerns. (Collins H, 2010)

In general, modern scholars argue that transformational imagery specific to women highlights temporal social liberation, rather than understanding the imagery as reflective of the apocalypse or the eschaton. This modern imposition of woman's liberation has been at the expense of understanding the transformational imagery of changing sexes in their encratic and martyr logic context with eschatological motivation. The elements may not be unique to As the church became more bureaucratized, then some of the titles used to denote these duties were changed originally the titles of priest or priestess were not utilized as they were used by pagan religions of the classical world. Over time, the priest title was added, but the title priestess was not. Women were called deaconesses, a lower-status position. Later on it became unacceptable for women to baptize as the Orthodox Church attempted rid Christianity of Gnostics. They used the specious argument that if Jesus had wanted women to baptize, then his own mother would have baptized him. When the men in position of power wanted women to not be ordained as priests, they used two arguments to promote this view. One, that Jesus only appointed male disciples and Paul's injunctions for women to keep silent during public discussions, and then women could not teach (Macdonald. M, 2010).They are many positive traditions regarding women in the New Testament and the early church. Women's presence in the gospels whether as mother or follower remained powerful traditions for later women. women's religious thought or always result in women's leadership, but as a constellation they point toward one type of theologizing that was meaningful to some early Christian women, which had a place for women's legitimate exercise of leadership, and to whose construction women contributed. If we look to these elements, we are able to discern important contributions of women to early Christian theology and praxis. These elements also provide an important location for discussing some

aspects of early Christian women's spiritual lives: their exercise of leadership, their ideals, and their attraction to Christianity, and what gave meaning to their self-identity as Christians. Women's prominence did not, however, go unchallenged. Every variety of ancient Christianity that advocated the legitimacy of women's leadership was eventually declared heretical, and evidence of women's early leadership roles was erased or suppressed. This erasure has taken many forms. Collections of prophetic oracles were destroyed. Texts were changed. As Christianity became accepted and institutionalized according to the Roman government model, equality granted to women in the first centuries disappeared. Church officials like Tertullian, Origen, Chrysostom, Jerome and Augustine emphasized women's inferiority and subordination to men, misogynistic ideas that were endemic in the classical Greco-Roman societies. Ideas from the classical writers were injected into the message of the New Testament, and women suffered in a variety of ways (Macdonald. M, 2010). Pertaining to women is derived from a community of women who practice sexual continence as an expression of their emancipation from the social institution of patriarchal marriage, and the misogynistic restraints of society? The prescribed gender roles which brought about Many cultures and sub cultures to the societies even then since the first century all major world religions including Christianity deprecate the role of a women to a certain degree it organized the religion of Christian religion in a gender Hierarchy way. This hierarchy theology placed women under the man's authority in the church, marriage and in society at large. Historically speaking women have been excluded from the church leadership and given any kind of important positions to them over the men. There are also very various egalitarian views of the bible which brings immense amount of freedom to women who were oppressed and were among the racial minorities, one acknowledges the elaborate equalities which have existed shortly after creation existed which believed that all are one **In Christ** it is considered as one of the sanctuary which there is a distinctions of race, national origin slavery and gender. The true benefit of being a Christian is that all are **'one'** in God. There are Christian traditionalists who at that time believe and understand the only way to claim equal availability of everyone in God is not to apply any Male-Preference in marriage, ordination of women, racism or any other forms of discrimination. The over-arching views of both books do prescribe a male-priority based hierarchy and gender roles in church, marriage and in society, the prescribed gender roles have been said to be of equal measure but in different in nature. From the beginning of the early Christian church stating with women being members of the movement, the bible tells us that in the gospels of the New Testament often we see Jesus speaking to women publicly and openly against the social norms of his time. he reached out to the marginalized in the society and his appeal was so great that even he had female followers like Mary Magdalene who was a prostitute and a condemned woman by society by Jesus looked at her with gracious eyes and she was a transformed lady, we see the various gender constructs even at the time of Jesus how society looked at women in a poor light and then alienates her from the community of society at large. (Collins H, 2010) If we look at time during Apostle Paul's Time and when he began his missionary journey women were given different titles and positions which out of the written sources there is also objective evidence to support women's prominent status and role within the early Christian churches. Women leadership in being church participants in the form of a deaconess or a helper was seen as a prestigious title given back then. We try to understand the analogy of men and women in relationship to how God designed them which is seen in the essence of God being one and three in persons. The three persons in the God Head are absolutely equal in essence; in fact they each share fully, simultaneously and without division the divine essence. Specifically their distinction of function is marked by an intrinsic relation of authority within the God-Head by which the Son is subject to the father and the spirit to the son (1Cor15:28, 1Cor 11:3) the clearest example in the bible of Christ Subjection to the father where the exalted and victorious son will be subject to all things given this understanding it states clearly and makes sense when for Paul states he speaks specifically of three authorities lines that exist Christ being the authority (Head) over every man, man being the authority(Head) over the women and God (the Father) is the authority (Head) over Christ. Just as three persons of God are equal in essence and yet they relate within a structure of Lines of authority so too women and men are equal in essence while relating within a similar structure of lines of authority.

The roles of women have been historically different in regards to formal position in church and marriage with regard to church leaderships. They have been organized according to the patriarchal mindset where women serve as below men, there has been a long term constrains on women being in more sub ordinate positions since early 1st century and before. The cultures of Judaism and Greco-Roman culture which are completely patriarchal societies in nature also placed men in positions of authority in marriage. Even the early church developed a monastic tradition which included the institution of the convent in the catholic denomination for women. They developed religious orders as nuns and sisters in which they dedicated their lives to God which was considered as an important Ministry towards the church and society (Hoffman Daniel. L, 2005).

Some complementarians understand the Trinity to present an analogy to the male/female relationship, as God designed it. God is one in essence and three in persons. The three persons of the God-head are absolutely equal in essence (in fact, they each share fully, simultaneously and without division the one divine essence), but they are distinct in function. Specifically, their distinction of function is marked by an intrinsic relation of authority within the God-head, by which the Son is subject to the Father, and the Spirit to the Son. 1 Cor. 11:3

states part of this: "God is the head of Christ." The clearest biblical example of Christ's subjection to the Father is in 1 Cor. 15:28 where the exalted and victorious Son "will also be subject to the One who subjected all things to Him." Given this understanding of the Trinity, it makes sense for Paul to say what He does in 1 Cor. 11:3. He speaks here of three authority lines that exist: Christ is the authority (head) over every man, man is the authority (head) over a woman, and God (the Father) is authority (head) over Christ. Just as the persons of God are equal in essence and yet they relate within a structure of lines of authority, so too men and women are equal in essence while relating within a similar structure of lines of authority. Christianity became the new driving force for the apostles and Christ's followers. Perhaps Paul, the infamous persecutor of the early Christians, utilized women even more than Jesus. Paul, known before his conversion as Saul of Tarsus, was a Roman citizen raised in the Pharisee Jewish traditions, which were very conservative. Once his miraculous conversion took place, he energetically traversed the Roman and Greek world proselytizing. Paul ordained her as a preacher of the gospel and an apostle of Christ. In the first four to five centuries of Christianity before the canon of the New Testament was solidified, the book called the Acts of Paul and Thecla was widely read and considered authentic biblical scriptures. Until it was barred from the official canon of the New Testament in 367 C.E., hardly anyone questioned its authenticity. Women had to find ways to appeal to the masses in terms of her position in church roles. Women in the Christian faith know that there is one true source of knowledge and that is God and the word i.e. Bible and it teaches us that God gives specific instructions to how men and women are in their biological makeup and womanhood being a license for freedom from slavery, bondage and seclusion. Women during the 1st century were given certain roles which were specific and they enjoyed greater sense of practical freedom but being chaste and modest were given great importance. Women were shown a great sense of dignity and freedom and during the Law of Moses they had to be honoured if shown any disrespect it was considered a serious offense, And if found guilty they were met with the most serious punishments. Even Jesus defied the patriarchal attitude which looked at women in a poor light, he conversed with the women at the well that to a Samaritan women a thing that even shocked his disciples (John4:27) He refused to bend to Pharisaic pressures and he refused to shun a sinful woman and who anoint and kiss his holy feet (Luke7:36) Godly women were numbered among those who ministered to Christ (Luke 8:3) some of them accompanying him to the foot of the cross (John19:25) so in terms of Christ Ministry women and men were treated in equal light as the scriptures say it does

Women shortage blighted the ancient world as many women showed an equal number of strength in leadership positions women in the early churches were seen as just a property in the ancient world which overwhelms and oppresses them thereby which patriarchy didn't characterize ancient cultures but were also powerful examples of powerful, creative, literate and accomplished women some in the proven invaluable contributions to early churches. On the hand early Christianity was an oasis of feminist liberty which we observe had some egalitarian impulses in the movement, it's impossible to quantify gender roles in the early churches; moreover, women's leadership quickly emerged as point of controversy among the Christian churches.

Women played a relatively prominent role in the early Christian communities compared to the larger social contexts, but the evidence is mixed. The first century was a period of gender experimentation, as people debated whether a woman could study philosophy or join men at public meals. Moreover while some early Christian women and men functioned as equals in leadership and authority, practices varied one from another. Eventually the role of women among the churches was subordinated as an official policy in almost all churches. We often forget the neglected role of women in the early Christian churches which much unsaid and many secular Christian writers at many times try to cover in the early involvement of the growth of Christianity. The upper echelons of society women converted themselves to Christianity as their male counterparts remain inordinate to them in the church as certain class of senatorial women it was an ecclesiastical sanction to marry slaves or choose freedom even though the Roman law prohibited it at that time (Hoffman Daniel. L, 2005). Women's Spiritual zeal exploded into social service as women served as helper in various social service organizations outside the private sphere of the home. Women selfless ministry became a trademark of Christian women's network. Women roles in the early texts were considered as having an active part in the work of the saints. The leadership roles were classified into three categories as saints chosen from the different localities of the history of the church. In many religious movements the shape of leadership was fluid and evolving. Women learnt to bear the persecution which came with their call. The power and presence of these women in early churches history can see the marks of oppression and resilience's their activities bear in the church in 1st century during the time period of the early church. The exclusion of women from equal participation in society contributes to the oppression of women. The power of males over women is most clearly visible in all forms of violence against women. Gender roles are therefore thought to be set by God and that fulfilling these assigned roles is a proof that one is a good Christian. The position of men is also constructed and supported by different texts and together the texts that refer to women and men are defined as "God's will". Everyone knows their place and the rules which govern the relationship between women and men are clearly set out. However when the situation is examined through the lens of gender equality we find that beneath the surface of niceness is a

system that favors men at the expense of women. It is a socio-cultural system that is characterized by inequality, where power belongs to men and the male child being valued more than the girl child. This male centeredness and rule by men is often referred to as patriarchy. Where there is inequality, there is injustice and injustice, as we have seen during the apartheid era, has to be confronted and overcome if there is to be justice and freedom for all. Through the lens of gender and gender equality in the church, I have divided it into five sections:

- ❖ The position of women in the church – what we see in the church today
- ❖ The portrayal of women in the Bible
- ❖ How do we respond to the Bible- The challenge of violence against women
- ❖ Taking charge of our own liberation

The root causes of gender inequality in the church. This is a huge area which is multi-faced and multidisciplinary. Looking at how the changing gender roles of the early church helped Christian women deal with the roles which were given to them and how best they made use of them. Gender analysis is not a threat to the church, but a tool that can enable us to root out those aspects in our faith traditions that perpetuate the oppression, exclusion and marginalization of women. Perhaps some of us feel that things should be left alone, but the rising incidents of violence against women is a clear sign that all is not well, that gender inequality is not a harmless practice that will disappear! Gender inequality needs to be seen for what it really is a crime against humanity and a seat for the struggle for justice. That struggle needs to happen within the church. Women's rights are human Lastly Jesus himself went far beyond customs and outlook of religious structures of not conforming to the cultural mentality which were unfavourable to women, Instead he reacted against inequalities based on sexual differences by calling women to follow in his ministry(Collins H, 2010).

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