

God and Her (Female) Clergy

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ABSTRACT (ENGLISH)

Religion has been used to justify inequity among the sexes, but it can also inspire empowerment.

FULL TEXT

Ever since Eve bit into an apple in the Garden of Eden, God has been rough on women.

Or, more precisely, the men who claim to speak on behalf of God have routinely disparaged women or discriminated against them. Male religious leaders declared menstruation ritually unclean and advised in Deuteronomy that when a girl doesn't bleed on her wedding night "the men of her town shall stone her to death."

Saint Paul orders women to "be in submission" and adds, "It is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church" (some scholars believe that Paul didn't write that passage, and that it was added later). Over the centuries, it was fine for women to be martyred (or, at times, to be burned as witches), but they were denied the right to become priests, rabbis or ministers.

Yet a revolution is unfolding across America and the world, and countless women will be presiding this weekend over Easter and Passover celebrations. In just a few decades, women have come to dominate many seminaries and rabbinical schools and are increasingly taking over the pulpit at congregations across the country.

"What we're seeing before our very eyes is a dramatic shift; in my mind it's as big as the Protestant Reformation," says the Rev. Serene Jones, the first woman president of New York City's Union Theological Seminary—where almost 60 percent of the students are now female.

"We're seeing a new day of understanding of who God is," Dr. Jones added. "When the people who are representing God, making God present, have female bodies, that inevitably changes the way you think about how God is."

Dr. Jones argues that over time women will come to dominate religious leadership and that this will powerfully reshape Americans' understanding of God from stern father to more of a maternal healer and nurturer. "It changes the way you think geopolitically about the greatest truth," she says.

Granted, an enormous distance remains to achieve equity, especially in Catholic, evangelical and Mormon churches and in Orthodox synagogues. Women studying to be ministers or rabbis share wrenching #MeToo tales of sexual abuse and of infuriating gender pay gaps.

Religion News Service calculated in 2015 that a majority of religious women belong to a denomination that generally prohibits them from becoming leaders.

It's a disgrace to humanity that for millennia we've placed a divine stamp on discrimination against women, insisting that inequity is actually sacred. But just as religion was initially used to justify slavery but later to inspire abolitionists, faith is now evolving from a rationale for suppressing women to a means for empowering them.

In small towns across America (including my hometown, Yamhill, Ore., which has one stoplight and five churches), this process also elevates women into public moral authorities. When a couple wrestles with infidelity, or a man beats his wife, it's now often a female pastor or rabbi who counsels them.

Will the messenger change the message? Not in every case, but women do bring their own perspectives to religious leadership. Ruth Messinger, who was president of American Jewish World Service, says that women in religious aid groups seem more inclined to address gender violence or girls' empowerment.

Likewise, with a majority of students in many seminaries and rabbinical schools now women, and increasingly leading congregations, it may become less natural to think of God as “He.” Already, Reconstructionist Judaism —where 63 percent of the new rabbis since 1998 have been female —refers to God with gender-neutral language or in the feminine.

There’s a legend in progressive Judaism that a man once angrily protested that a woman no more belongs at a synagogue pulpit than an orange belongs on a Seder plate. So these days when celebrating Passover, some Jewish families include an orange on the Seder plate.

Rabbi Emily Barton, who presides over a Conservative synagogue in Des Moines, says that her congregation hasn’t had a problem with the fact that she’s a woman and a lesbian. But she does acknowledge that she’s uncomfortable with passages in the Bible that seem homophobic or misogynistic. “If I was giving advice to women who wanted to be clergy, I’d say, ‘Be O.K. with being uncomfortable, because there are always going to be things in your religion that make you uncomfortable,’ ” Barton said.” Sometimes you just have to live with your discomfort.”

Women clergy can mine the Bible for plenty of strong women role models and for passages that suggest real equality. One of ancient Israel’s leaders was a woman, Deborah (Judges 4-5), and later Esther saved the Jews from slaughter by the Persians. As for the New Testament, the first witnesses to the Resurrection are women. And here’s a quick quiz question: In the Bible, who is the only person who out-argues Jesus in a public debate?

The answer is an unnamed gentile woman. Both Mark (7:24-30) and Matthew (15:21-28) tell how she approaches Jesus —in Mark’s version, she barges into the house where he’s staying —and begs him to heal her daughter. Jesus is initially dismissive of her, saying that he will help only his fellow Jews. “It is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to the dogs,” he says (calling someone a dog was a serious insult).

“Yes it is, Lord,” she replies. “Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table.” She talks back! She’s feisty! But Jesus then praises her for her “great faith” and heals her daughter. The story can be read as a celebration of a woman who, er, persisted.

Credit: Nicholas Kristof

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