

Can a Man Be a Christian?

WHY ARE THE PEWS of Christian churches filled with women? Mary Maples Dunn despairs of explaining “gender differentiation” in Christianity: “How and why this gender differentiation develops in respect to religion is imperfectly understood; we are not certain that it is inherent in Christianity itself; we do not know why it becomes part of a social-religious order, what function it might have in that society, nor what conditions produce the dichotomy.”¹ Despite her profession of ignorance, Dunn attributes male flight from churches to social features peculiar to seventeenth-century New England—the incipient separation of church and state, for instance. But such features do not explain similar paucities of men in England, France, and Latin America.

Various theories may explain why male participation sinks to particularly low levels at certain times. Historians look at the forces at work in a certain period and find the source of lower male participation. Without a doubt, circumstances may reinforce the barrier between men and the church. Yet, as Tony Walter observes, though “These theories may explain why a particular church at a particular time appeals to women, there is as yet no generally accepted theory of why women in general seem to be more religious than men.”² Explanations that rely on accidents of time and place explain too little.

Philosophers and theologians seek for deeper explanations in the nature of religion or of man. Yet they often seem unaware that the lack of male religious observance, though widespread in Western Christianity, is not universal either in Christianity or religion in general. Their explanations go too far. If men are by nature nonreligious, why do Islam and Judaism have predominantly male memberships and why have they for centuries evoked intense commitment from men? If Christianity in itself is obnoxious to men in some peculiar way, why was there little comment on the lack of men during its first millennium, and why do Orthodox churches seem to differ from Western ones in the proportion of male membership? What is it about the nature of men and of Western Christianity that has created such a tension in their relationship in the last millenium?

POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC CHANGES

Female interest in religion, according to one school, is a result of a sexual division of labor that emerged in modern European society. The revolutionary thinkers of the Enlightenment regarded the established churches of Europe with suspicion. The churches were departments of state, and therefore, whether they were Anglican, Catholic, Lutheran, or Calvinist, buttressed the established order. Though the first disestablishment of churches was brought about by peaceful means after the American Revolution, disestablishment was bloodier in Europe. The revolutionaries of the continental Enlightenment tended to atheism rather than stoicism and attacked the French church root and branch. Wherever Napoleon's armies conquered, the church lost its estates and wealth. The age of a secular laity had replaced the alliance of throne and altar in the *ancien regime*.

Before the industrial revolution, men and women labored together on farms or household workshops, but the industrial revolution separated work from the home. Initially, women and children worked in factories because they would accept low pay. When men replaced them as the principal workers in factories, these men sepa-

rated their families as much as possible from the squalor and dangers of the industrial city, and suburbia was born. Women specialized in taking care of the house and children, separated themselves from the competitive, workaday world, and gave the home a sacred and sentimental aura. As religion had no place in politics or business, men relegated it to the home and to the woman's sphere of responsibility. Walter Rauschenbusch, at the beginning of the twentieth century, claimed the failure to preach the Social Gospel as the reason "that our churches are overwhelmingly feminine."³ Women are domestic and religious, men are public and therefore irreligious: "Men's life faces the outward world, and his instincts and interests lie that way. Hence, men crowd where public questions get downright discussion. Our individualistic religion has helped to feminize our churches."⁴

A related explanation for women's greater interest in religion is that religion somehow compensates for their inferior social position. Men want women to be religious so that women will not rebel against oppression, and indeed will accept oppression as a blessing: "Religion was a means of enculturating women to their domestic maternal role, to acceptance of powerlessness and dependency on men."⁵ This version of Marxist theory holds that religion is the opiate, not only of the masses, but especially of women. Simone de Beauvoir ascribes the existence of religion to the oppression of women: "There is a justification, a supreme compensation, which society is ever wont to bestow upon woman: that is, religion. There must be a religion for women as there must be one for the common people and for exactly the same reasons. When a sex or a class is condemned to immanence, it is necessary to offer it the mirage of some sort of transcendence."⁶ Denied the attainment of true transcendence of their biological selves, a transcendence attainable only through careers in public life, women seek false transcendence in the illusions of religion.

A variation of this theory is that religion (inadvertently no doubt) has given oppressed women a sphere of influence and an outlet for their frustrated talents. Though women have been confined to the private sphere of home and family—*Kinder, Kirche, Küche*—in their own sphere they can have a great deal of autonomy. Just as in

the Middle Ages, women, excluded from the governance of the church by clericalism, had turned to visions to establish a charismatic authority for themselves, now women, excluded from government, commerce, and education, turned to the church, which allowed them to exercise their abilities and to gain some power and respect.

The clergy, ignored by men, turned their attention to women. Francis Trollope observed this phenomenon in America, but her observations can be generalized. Men's crudity of manners led them to neglect women and prefer coarse male company. The only exception to this male neglect of women was the clergy: "It is from the clergy only that the women of America receive that sort of attention which is so dearly valued by every female heart throughout the world."⁷ Trollope was both fascinated and horrified by the emotionalism of the American religion of the revival and the campground. She ascribed part of the interest in revivals to the lack of other amusements.⁸ Young women were reduced to hysteria in the revivals, and ministers "whispered comfortings, and from time to time [bestowed] a mystic caress. More than once I saw a young neck encircled by a reverend arm."⁹ Americans tended to let the emotional excitement of their religion lead to more carnal excitement. English enthusiasts too, according to Msgr. Ronald Knox, reverted to an orgiastic religion.¹⁰ A few "smart young clerks" attended the evening prayer meetings that Trollope observed, perhaps with this in mind.¹¹ Among American young men it is a matter of folklore that a revival is an excellent place to pick up a young woman; but apparently not even the prospect of sexually excited women was enough to get men interested in church.

THE WEAKNESS OF WOMEN

Cotton Mather described the Christian fidelity of Puritan women as their response to the danger of death in childbirth: "The *Curse* in the Difficulties both of *Subjection* and of *Child bearing*, which the *Female Sex* is doom'd unto, has been turned into a *Blessing*."¹² On this view, it is the desire to seek shelter from the weakness of their bodies that

leads women to Christianity. Another suspicion (and it is probably the widestspread) is that women are more emotional than men and that religion (the hidden assumption) is a matter of emotion. In the eighteenth century, Bishop Gregoire pointed to the supposed greater emotionalism of women: “Men are directed to conviction by reason; women to persuasion by sentiment.”¹³

Freud thought that women were more religious than men because they were more feminine, as he understood femininity. In his theory of masculinity and femininity,¹⁴ masculinity is the reality principle, “correspondence with the real, external world.”¹⁵ The masculine, scientific mind is tough: it is able to face such unpleasant realities as the absence of a benevolent Providence that guides human affairs. Femininity, according to Freud, is the principle of wish-fulfillment, and their femininity causes women to view reality as ultimately promising a fulfillment of our infantile desires for love and safety. Freud wanted all adults, including women, to adopt the reality principle, to become masculine, and to give up the fantasy world of wish-fulfillment that Christianity embodies. Freud’s “guiding contrast is between wish fulfillment provided by the illusion of a father-God’s loving existence and scientifically based resignation to reason and necessity, a resignation which stems from renunciation of childhood wishes.”¹⁶ If women would accept the reality principle, they would become tough-minded and give up the childish indulgence of religion.

By the nineteenth century, the home, mother, and God were joined in a Victorian Trinity, and heaven was the restoration of the family circle beyond the grave: Women, confined to the home, already lived half in heaven. Because Christianity reverses natural values, and thinks better of seeming failure and weakness—the cross—than of superficial worldly success, women’s exclusion from public life redounded to their benefit. The London preacher James Fordyce attributed women’s greater religiosity to their more sheltered lives, protected from temptation and with leisure for piety: “Nothing can be more plain, than that Providence has placed you most commonly in circumstances peculiarly advantageous for the exercises of devotion, and for the preservation of that virtue, without

which every profession of godliness must be regarded as an imprudent pretense. The situation of men lays them open to a variety of temptations, that lay out of your road. The bustle of life, in which they are generally engaged, leaves them but little leisure for holy offices.”¹⁷ But the Reverend Fordyce is only saying that women are more religious because religion is a feminine activity, a matter of exalted sentiment, removed from activity and strife.

Throughout the nineteenth century the temperance movement aimed to protect women from the vicious pleasures of men. Ministers and women worked together against men, especially young men: “It was often as a covert crusade to salvage not the alcoholic but the woman at his mercy. The drunkard, usually a male, destroys by his debauches himself and his saintly wife, mother, daughter, or sister who loves him and would draw him from the saloon to the fireside.”¹⁸ Women took over the leadership of family prayers; men were obviously unsuitable.¹⁹

THE GOODNESS OF WOMEN

Msgr. James Alberione’s *Woman: Her Influence and Zeal* embodies the attitudes to gender that have dominated Western Christianity and provided the seeds of the feminism that now dominates the church. This book, directed to priests, lays down the principle “that woman is more naturally inclined to the practice of holiness”²⁰ than the male is. In this he echoes Pius XI, who calls woman “the devout sex.”²¹ Why are women more religious than men? Alberione has the answer: “She is more understanding in things of the heart, she is more spiritual than man. More humble, more tender, and consequently, more religious than man, she is more inclined to prayer, to charity, and to hope. More than man, woman feels the need for pure love; her love, less egoistic, is unselfish and prone to sacrifice.”²² Religion is, in Alberione’s estimation, primarily an affair of the heart. Hence, to be religious, one has to be feminine.

A feminist novelist has a character say “to bring about true Christian civilization . . . the men must become more like women, and the women more like angels.”²³ A clergyman in 1854 asserted

that “the womanly element predominated” in Jesus,²⁴ and Henry Ward Beecher said that a mother’s love is “a revelation of the love of God.”²⁵ Another Unitarian, in 1858, claimed that Christianity involved a rejection of masculinity; it had “proclaimed the Gospel of the ‘Ever Feminine’” and also preached “the utter nothingness of masculine self-sufficiency.”²⁶ Goethe’s “Ewig-weibliche” had become the locus of divine activity in the world. Women had to be the saviors of men, drawing the errant male sinner back to home and heaven. Protestants recovered a sympathy with Catholic devotion to Mary (“Our tainted nature’s solitary boast”), who tended to displace Jesus in Catholic popular devotion. One priest, it is alleged, after preaching a sermon on the greatness of Mary, concluded that it was no wonder her son turned out so well.²⁷

Sarah J. Hale went so far as to claim that women are not as fallen as men: “He is naturally selfish in his affections; and *selfishness* is the sin of depravity. But woman was not thus cast down.”²⁸ Women preserve an unselfish affection and love which men have lost. They are therefore God’s chosen instruments. For Hale, “the Christian and the feminine are one.”²⁹ Men are wicked, women are good, and that is why “more than three-fourths of the professed followers of Christ are women.”³⁰ Christians are followers of a male, but one who had no earthly father, and got his human nature entirely from a woman. Therefore, Jesus’s “human soul, derived from a woman, trained by a woman, was most truly womanly in its characteristics.”³¹ His closest disciples were either women or like women, such as “the faithful, gentle, loving, *womanlike* John”³² (for so the image of the Son of Thunder has become in the Church).

Allen Bridgman believed that an overvaluation of the feminine and an undervaluation of the masculine were at the root of the feminization of religion. His contemporaries were “impressed chiefly with the angelic side of the daughters of men and with the earthward tendencies of his brethren.”³³ He admits the possible truth of this characterization, but reminds Christians that their religion is addressed to sinners, not the just.

In a medieval manuscript, in what is perhaps a rhetorical exercise in *sic et non*, we find claims that “Woman is to be preferred to man, to

wit in material: Adam made from clay and Eve from the side of Adam; in place: Adam made outside paradise and Eve w'in; in conception: a woman conceived God which a man did not do; in apparition: Christ appeared to a woman after the Resurrection, to wit the Magdalene; in exaltation: a woman is exalted above the choirs of angels, to wit the Blessed Mary."³⁴ Humbert of Romans, (d. 1277) the Master-General of the Dominicans echoed this attitude:

Note that God gave women many prerogatives, not only over other living things, but even over man himself, and this (i) by nature; (ii) by grace; and (iii) by glory.

(i) In the world of nature she excelled man by her origin, for man He made of the vile earth, but woman He made in Paradise. Man he formed of the slime, but woman of man's rib. She was not made of a lower limb of man—as for example of his foot—lest man should esteem her his servant, but from his midmost part, that he should hold her to be his fellow, as Adam himself said: “The woman whom Thou gavest me as my helpmate.”

(ii) In the world of grace she excelled man. . . . We do not read of any man trying to prevent the Passion of Our Lord, but we do read of a woman who tried—namely, Pilate's wife, who sought to dissuade her husband from so great a crime. . . . Again at His Resurrection, it was to a woman that He first appeared—namely, to Mary Magdalene.

(iii) In the world of glory, for the king in that country is no mere man but a mere woman is its queen; nor is anyone who is merely man as powerful there as a mere woman. Thus is woman's nature in Our Lady ranked. It is not a mere man who is set above the angels and all the rest of the heavenly country in worth, and dignity, and power; and this should lead woman to love God and hate evil.³⁵

St. Bernadine even declared that “It is a great grace to be a woman: More women are saved than men.”³⁶ Protestants, despite their rejection of the Catholic veneration of Mary, inherited this attitude to women. Jonathan Edwards reminded his congregation that “this sex has the peculiar honor in the affair of the redemption of the second.”³⁷

The virtue that made women good and loving was, above all, obedience. Because women are weak, helpless, and trained to obedience, they more easily become Christians, who are likewise weak, helpless, and trained to obedience. Gertrud von le Fort speculates that “perhaps the realization that man’s weakness is his real and only strength, his surrender to God’s holy will his only true victory he can achieve, perhaps such an awareness is more connate to feminine than to masculine nature.”³⁸ In the Christian paradox, woman’s feminine passivity is more valuable than masculine activity: “The receptive, passive attitude of the feminine principle appears as the decisive, the positive element in the Christian order of grace.”³⁹ This receptivity is bridal. Christians must be brides of Christ, and men do not like this role, which could hardly be a greater denial of their masculinity.

This approach to the meaning of gender in religion continues to be popular in many Christian circles, especially those influenced by C. S. Lewis and Hans Urs von Balthasar.⁴⁰ Manfred Hauke states that “in relation to God, the soul is receptive, feminine.”⁴¹ F. X. Arnold describes “the special inclination which woman has for religion” as “the truly feminine, the will to surrender, the readiness to be receptive.”⁴² The essential element in a religious attitude is a “passive receptivity,” because “in this readiness for self-sacrifice and in this cooperation of the creature, all that is truly religious in humanity is revealed.”⁴³ Of Mary, George T. Montague says “She is response and instrument.”⁴⁴

MASCULINITY IS UNCHRISTIAN

Nietzsche saw a contradiction between the Christian and the masculine. Christianity is a denial of life, and “life itself is essentially appropriation, injury, overpowering of what is alien and weaker; suppression, hardness, imposition of one’s own forms, incorporation, and at least, at its mildest, exploitation.”⁴⁵ Christianity is a religion for slaves, weaklings, the effeminate, “a sacrifice of all freedom, all pride, all self-confidence of the spirit; at the same time, enslavement

and self mockery, self mutilation.”⁴⁶ Christianity denies the will to power, so it cannot be masculine. A man must therefore choose between being masculine and Christian; he cannot be both.

Tony Walter comes to the same conclusion as Nietzsche. Walter blames “the macho ethic” that “hinders men from worshipping God.”⁴⁷ Men have a strong drive toward separation, autonomy, and independence. Walter sees this drive as making men enemies of the Gospel: “Taking up the cross, denying himself, and abasing himself before God is hardly the fulfillment of his masculinity!”⁴⁸ Therefore masculinity is evil: “The macho ethic of pride in independence thus appears as a Satanic device for keeping men from faith in Christ, while the feminine ethic appears as a schoolmistress to bring women to faith in Christ.”⁴⁹ Men must change, not the Church: “It is secular male culture that needs to be challenged and changed, not female church culture.”⁵⁰ Only if men become like women can they become Christian.

THOSE WHO LOOK to social forces to explain the comparatively weak religious commitment of men fail in their explanations because the phenomenon appears always to antedate the historical period under consideration. Evidence exists that even in the high Middle Ages women were already more devotedly religious than men.

Nietzsche and those who take a more theoretical approach, seeing an eternal animosity between masculinity and Christianity (or even religion in general), cannot account for Judaism and Islam, or for the first millennium of Christianity, the age of the Church Fathers, in which there is no evidence of a substantial disparity in religious practice between men and women. Something has happened in Western Christianity that has caused it to react unfavorably to masculinity. But what is masculinity? Is it the macho ethic of Walter’s caricature, or is it violent self-will, as in Nietzsche’s estimation? What is it that men seek to become? To answer that question I shall turn in the next chapter to anthropology and developmental psychology, as well as to the literature of masculinity, the epic.