

# WOMEN PRIESTS

by

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We are generally told that the refusal to ordain women for the priestly ministry (that of bishop or of priest of the second rank) arises just from an outdated conception of the inequality of the sexes, and of the invincible inferiority of woman compared with man.

We are then assured that if Christ himself, and the apostles after him, called and ordained only men, it was because the prejudices of their age did not allow them to do otherwise, whether they did not think it possible to oppose them successfully, or whether they themselves were incapable of freeing themselves from them.

We are told finally that if Christ did not call women to the apostolate, that has no more lasting significance for the Church than the fact that he called only Jews to it. Just as, once it emerged from the Jewish world, Christianity conferred the priesthood on non-Jews as a matter of course, so nowadays, having at last emerged from a society in which the male was exaggeratedly predominant, it has, they say, no good reason to refuse it to women.

For those who, like too many of our contemporaries, are completely ignorant of the history of customs and ideas, these reasons may seem irrefutable, indeed even evident. But it is enough to inquire more exactly about the facts and to reflect on the motivations they reveal to judge how flimsy, not to say completely unsubstantial, these apparently certain reasons are.

## *Female priests in early times*

Let us take first of all the second of these statements: the contemporary society of Christ, in particular, and of antiquity in general, we are told, could not accept women priests.

One thinks one is dreaming when one hears people who consider themselves enlightened and unprejudiced, calmly come out with such a gross blunder.

In fact, the ancient world, in particular but not exclusively, far from it, the Mediterranean world, had always known, from the most ancient civilizations of the fertile crescent to Greece and Rome at the time of the origins of Christianity, female priests alongside male priests and not at all in a condition of inferiority in relation to the latter. And if there was a particular tendency in this connection, at the time of Christ and the apostles, it was rather towards the crediting than the discrediting of female priests.

In religions based on mysteries, which begin to spread at the same time as Christianity or very shortly afterwards, and which will turn out to be its last and most formidable competitors in the 3rd century, just before its victory, there is actually a recrudescence in the development of female priesthoods, in connection with the cults of mother-goddesses, divinities of the fertility of the soil changing into deities of future life, which are one of the most outstanding religious characteristics of the era.

If, therefore, new-born Christianity, in spite of all the ways in which its practices differed from Judaism, owing to the generosity of its opening to the pagan world, abided by the traditionally Jewish and biblical idea: that the priesthood is the exclusive reserve of males, it was not at all a surrender to the environment, to the current prejudices of the milieu in which it was spreading. It was, on the contrary, in decided opposition to what this environment, generally speaking, considered as a matter of course.

And, it must be added at once, if Judaism itself, in the wake of the old Hebrew religion, had adopted and maintained this position, it was already in opposition, if anything even more flagrantly, to the unanimous practice of the religions of the peoples among which biblical inspiration intervened, . . . precisely to form a people whose religion was quite different!

The fact is so obvious that those who are not completely ignorant of the comparative history of religions, in the ancient Semitic East especially, are obliged to find another explanation.

We are then told that if, originally, the Mosaic religion rejected the priesthood of women, that can be explained by the fact that the female priesthoods, connected as they actually were with the naturist fertility religions and their Bacchanalian rites, involved inadmissible practices, such as ritual prostitution.

#### *Practices rule out prejudice*

This explanation, unfortunately, either explains nothing or else proves far too much. These practices, in fact, including ritual prostitution, were not reserved or limited to the female priesthoods in

these religions. They applied equally and to the same extent to the male priesthoods. If, then, they could explain the refusal on the part of the Hebrews to accept a female priesthood tainted with these defects, it is not clear how they could have admitted, under these conditions, a male priesthood which, at the time and in the environment in which they lived, was equally tainted.

It is necessary, therefore, to recognize without beating about the bush what is an obvious fact: when we study, in their historical and cultural context, the developments of the Hebrew, then Jewish, and finally Christian religion, it is plain that it was not out of unthinking adherence to the practices or prejudices of their contemporaries that the Christians, following the Jews, themselves the heirs to the Mosaic traditions, were constant in their refusal to accept women priests. It was, on the contrary, in constant opposition to what, in practice, the whole of antiquity considered normal.

In the Jewish and Christian tradition, it is not a question, as some people would like us to believe, of the effect of being carried along by customs accepted uncritically. It is rather the result of a very deliberate and singularly persistent "no".

Even if the theory has not been worked out, it is not the fruit of an absence of principles. It is the result, on the contrary, of an extraordinarily constant fidelity, in spite of all the pressure of customs and environment, to a tenaciously held principle.

To this, of course, it will be replied: but if it is a question of principle, what can this principle be but the idea of woman's inequality, her invincible inferiority, with regard to man?

### *Woman equal but different*

But, here the improbability of the reasoning is again apparent, and perhaps more glaringly than ever. The religion of the Bible, then Judaism, and even more clearly Christianity following in their footsteps, even if they did not constitute the only tradition in ancient human history in which the fundamental equality of woman and man was proclaimed, maintained and defended, above all on the religious plane but also on the whole plane of created existence, nevertheless they unquestionably constitute the firmest and clearest tradition on this point.

And if, finally, that seems something to be taken for granted today, no serious historian will dream of questioning that, that is a result of Christian preaching, for which the whole of Judaism, the whole Bible which it quotes as an authority, had prepared.

Certainly, it is no less an essential part of Christianity, as of the whole biblical tradition, to uphold that woman, though the equal of man, must nevertheless remain different from him. In other words, this equality is not that of pure and simple identity, but the far more positive and fruitful equality of complementarity.

And, as we will soon see, it is precisely this safeguarding of a necessary complementarity, without which woman's claimed equity would be nothing but the annihilation of her originality and of her own identity, that motivates the exclusive attribution of the priestly ministry to man, to the male.

But, for the moment, let us just stress the absurdity of a position which explains the exclusively male character of the Hebrew or Christian priesthood as the result of an inferior conception of woman, when it is, on the contrary, the Bible and the Gospel alone which have caused the certainty of her equality to triumph in a world in which, nevertheless, the priesthood had never been reserved for man anywhere, as it has always been in the Church as well as in Israel.

This is accentuated by the fact that in Israel, where the role of prophetism was not less, and can even be said to have been far more decisive than that of the priesthood, the prophetic function does not seem to have been reserved to man. Though relatively few women were recognized as having this gift, there is no trace of any opposition to them when they seemed to have it.

But, in a more general way, the traces detected in the Bible or in ancient Judaism of an apparent discrediting of woman, of female sexuality in particular, when examined thoroughly, reveal the very opposite.

### *Misrepresentations*

What is the meaning of the "purification" to which women are subjected, on the fourth day after the birth of a male child, or which men themselves will have to undergo, after sexual contact with a woman, before being able to take part in worship again?<sup>1</sup> Is there really, as we are told over and over again, any idea of a fundamental impurity of the female or a contamination contracted by the male when he approaches her?

From the viewpoint of a scientific religious phenomenology such interpretations are not only ridiculously naive, they are a clear case of misinterpretation.

<sup>1</sup> Leviticus, 12, 26, and the whole of chap. 15.

To show this, let us recall in the first place that, in the same way, according to the most ancient Jewish tradition, mere contact with the scrolls of the Torah, or any inspired book, "solls the hands". In the same archaic sense, traditional Christian liturgy speaks of "purifying" the sacred vessels, when it is actually a question of eliminating all traces of the consecrated elements.

This is the key to these prescriptions concerning sexuality, and precisely the woman's part. It is not that they are, either of them, impure. It is, on the contrary that which is sacred in them, since one is the creative manifestation of life in the creature itself, while the other is the instrument of this shared creativity.

Hence a suspicion, a presumption of possible sin in every contact with them on the part of fallen man, just as in his contact with the very signs of the divine presence: is he not always tempted by lack of faith in the divine word, unfaithfulness to the divine plan which it proclaims and promotes?

In both cases, if there is a suspicion of corruption here, it is and it is only this *corruptio optimi*, which is evidently *corruptio pessima*.<sup>2</sup>

What conclusions have not been drawn, likewise, from the blessing that the rabbis taught men to utter: of having been "made men and not women"? What is forgotten in this case, above all, are the same prescriptions to women, in the same way, to bless God for having made them what they are.<sup>3</sup>

What is the meaning in fact, of both these blessings? It is, as these same rabbis have explained unceasingly, that the whole yoke of the Torah, and in particular the priestly functions, *Abodah*, the sacrificial service, has been imposed on man only, who is only too tempted to jib at the extra demands it involves. Hence the necessity of inculcating in him that these demands, however burdensome they may be, must be accepted by him as an honour. Conversely, woman, towards whom God manifests even more the liberality of his mercy than the severity of his justice, has only to render God pure thanksgiving for the vocation that is hers.

#### *Her family role*

This, however, does not mean in the slightest that woman is excluded from worship. It is just that the responsibility for public worship does not pertain to her, although she belongs there on

<sup>2</sup> *Corruptio optimi*: corruption of the best. *Corruptio pessima*: the worst corruption (Ed.'s note).

<sup>3</sup> See the text of these blessings and the commentary on them in the *Berakoth* treatises of *Mischnah* and *Tosefta*.

an equal footing with man. But it is because she has the responsibility for this fundamental cell of the people of God, the family, which, for Israel, remains the first and ultimate sanctuary.

In this capacity, it falls to her to prepare the paschal meal, which is the biblical sacrifice, and indeed every sacred meal, although she does not preside over it, just as it is she who lights the Sabbath lamp, every Saturday.

This is more than enough to show us that the differentiation, already present in the Old Testament, does not imply inferiority but an indispensable complementarity, which even implies a far more immediate, and a far more constant intimacy with the sacred than in the case of man.

That is why, although God is always spoken of in the Bible, in Jewish and later in Christian liturgy, as a male, Wisdom, which, however, will come to mean the closest association that can be conceived of humanity with divine thought and life, will always be represented by Israel as female.

What is, if possible, even more remarkable: the immanent presence of God, not only with man but in him, will always be described by the rabbis under the female features of *Schekinah*.<sup>4</sup>

But what beats all, it must be added, is that what we call in English the "Spirit" of God, that is, the communication of divine vitality and energy to man, by initiation, as it were, into his specific life and activity, is designated in Hebrew (as in the other Semitic languages) by a feminine, not a masculine noun: *Rouach Adonai*.

### *Arguments invalid*

When we have observed these historical data which are, as it were, the coordinates for the reservation of the priesthood to men from the Old Testament and throughout the history of the Church up to our days, we can no longer believe that it is a fortuitous phenomenon, to be explained in terms of transitory contingencies, but not corresponding to any really essential necessity of the subjects in question.

It is true that today a number of theologians and even Scripture scholars tell us that, if the fact is undeniable, throughout the whole Bible and tradition, it is not possible, however, to find any theological justification for it.

<sup>4</sup> We devoted a study to this notion in *Bible et vie chrétienne*, Dec. 1957, pp. 7 ff. In Jewish thought, *Schekinah* "is the special presence of God with his people, localized in a certain way in the Tabernacle, and later in the Temple."

Under these conditions, they tell us, we are in the presence of one of these questions of discipline, matters of opportuneness, not of principle, and, if the Church should come to believe that it might be a good thing, under changed circumstances, to give the priesthood to women, as it may have been a good thing not to do so in the past, nothing can prevent her from doing so.

This line of reasoning is extraordinarily without substance. The perseverance of the Church, following upon everything that we have in the Bible, in maintaining, contrary to all the customs of mankind, a certain way of acting, were it not supported by a fundamental principle, even if it had remained more or less implicit up to now, would be incomprehensible, and what is more unjustifiable.

Actually, it is certainly a theological principle that motivates the reservation of the priesthood to men, and a principle made explicit, if not completely in any case unquestionably, from the beginning of revelation, although not yet defined exactly.

Those who seem incapable of seeing it, acting as they do today, would have said likewise before the Nicene Council that the authentically divine sonship of Jesus could not be considered a theological principle, since precisely this council was necessary to define it through the consubstantiality of the Son with the Father. With this kind of reasoning, these people would have declared the divinity of the Spirit not justifiable theologically before the Council of Constantinople, or the unity of the person of Christ before the Council of Ephesus, or the whole reality of his two natures, the human and the divine, before the Council of Chalcedon, etc.

### *Sluggish view*

Behind their affirmation, there is a view of theology that must be called sluggish, because it is completely static, the result of a narrowly literalistic view of revelation. This is what makes all narrow-minded conservatives the involuntary, but alas, the most effective allies of all inertia of a thoughtlessness which regards itself as pious.

In the case that interests us, it does not seem to us exaggerated to say that, whereas there do not exist a text or argument the production of which would be sufficient to refute our contradictors, such texts and arguments did not exist either — as the length and the difficulties of the Arian controversy clearly showed — even in the case of the divinity of Christ, which the first ecumenical Council had to define for this very reason.

But, in the present case, as well, the massive *consensus fidelium* (over twenty centuries!) is based on a superabundance, in reality, of biblical teaching and Christian spiritual experience which can be overlooked only by a short-sighted view of the texts and facts.

It is this that makes quite certain the final decision that the Church should take, the definition of her faith with which she should support it, if her authorities found themselves driven into a corner by the opponents of tradition.

Let us add that, in the present case, behind the Christian and biblical sense, there is a natural, spontaneous presentiment of healthy humanity, which a simple anthropological reflection, really well-founded and developed scientifically, has no difficulty in formulating and justifying.

### *Equality versus identity*

The present demand for the ordination of women, in fact, with a view to ensuring the equality of woman and man, supposes that this equality can be obtained only by as radical an elimination as possible of the differences between man and woman. But for more experienced psychologists and sociologists, that is a characteristic which reveals the unfavourable conditions in which this problem of the equality of the sexes is raised in modern times.

Follow this path, what we wish to promote, runs the risk of being ruined beforehand, because the problem is raised, without it being realized in unrealistic, self-defeating terms. The apparent victory that would be won under similar circumstances, far from ensuring what we have set our heart on, would be its masked defeat.

In this case we find ourselves, actually, in the presence of a form of feminism which, however well meant, cannot but be ruinous for a real liberation of woman. For an equality that is confused with sheer identity with another, when he is certainly your equal but without being completely identical for that reason, can only be a delusion. It cannot but lead in the end, for the one who claims it, to loss of identity.

### *Situation of blacks*

This has been clearly seen recently, in connection with a quite different but similar discussion: that of racial equality in the United States. The most intelligent and realistic black leaders have realized



it in time, and the approach to the problem has been completely changed in a few years. Whites of good will, followed at first by the more ingenuous blacks, had thought they were offering them perfect equality with them by proposing to them pure and simple integration in their own society, that is, a society made completely by whites, according to their own tastes. But the more perspicacious blacks, on thinking things over, did not take long to realize that such an integration far, from signifying the hoped-for liberation, could not but lead to the sheer liquidation of what they are, and what they intend to remain, and rightly. Even supposing it could ever succeed, it would not at all make blacks, as blacks, the equals of whites, but blacks ashamed of themselves, concealing their blackness behind a screen of pseudo-whiteness which could not deceive anyone. Hence the reaction, apparently paradoxical, but fundamentally very realistic and deeply healthy of the black leaders who, in America today, do not hesitate to say that an integration of blacks in white society such as had been conceived to begin with, would actually be worse for them than apartheid in South Africa. In fact, even if the latter implies their inferiority, or in any case their perpetual status as minors, it begins at least by recognizing their identity. Integration such as was proposed, on the other hand, claiming to ignore the latter purely and simply, if it were attempted to put it into practice, could only aim at abolishing it. Systematically applied and pursued, it would lead to the most radical of genocides.

*Mutatis mutandis*, as the great Dutch psychologist Buijtendijk<sup>5</sup> showed perfectly, it is the same for all over-simplified feminism, which sees no other means of making woman equal with man than by making her mannish. But that is tantamount to wiping her out as a woman. If this kind of feminism were to triumph, it would be only a Pyrrhic victory for women. It would mean, in fact the definitive consecration of the most uncomprehending masculinity, of the most absurd masculinism.

### *Self-defeating feminism*

This is the aim, willy-nilly, we think, of the present supposition that the equality of woman and man could be affirmed and consolidated by the ordination of women to the priesthood. Far from producing this effect, it would only be a particularly unreasonable

<sup>5</sup> Buijtendijk's book has been translated into French: *La Femme*.

manifestation of this kind of essentially self-defeating feminism. For it is possible to cherish the dream of an ordination of women only by refusing to admit this mystery of woman which is inherent in her own identity, and repudiation of which would amount to depriving her of her dignity, and, when pushed to extremes, to denying her the right to existence.

It is no mere chance, let us be quite convinced, that the very age in which it is claimed to make woman the equal of man by giving her the priesthood, is an age in which we see her, more than ever before, perhaps, reduced to a mere object of pleasure for man, for the idle male. In both cases, in fact, it is agreed to deny woman all that is specifically hers, recognizing her as having only a borrowed value, either in complete dependency on the male, or in complete confusion with him.

In opposition to both, an analysis of this mystery of woman, which underlies the Scriptures and the whole of Christian tradition, while taking care not to crush her femininity by conferring, on her a ministry which is not suitable for her, will enable us to discover, or rediscover, the ministries for which she is fitted, and which it is certainly important, for the Church and the world today, to attribute to her at last or quite simply to restore to her.

What has just been said should make it quite clear that it is not by diminishing, far less in order to diminish, woman, her role in the Church and in the world, but on the contrary to recognize the indispensable grandeur of this role, the unique beauty of her femininity, that it is important to rediscover, or to discover, perhaps, better than ever, the mystery of woman. One of the keys to the crisis with which both the Church and the world are struggling today, and paradoxically the Church even more, perhaps, than the world, is precisely ignorance of this mystery today, an ignorance which, despite superficial appearances, is deeper, perhaps, than ever. In the whole of the Bible and in ecclesiastical tradition, in fact, the mystery of woman is seen as the final mystery of creation, and especially of creation redeemed, saved, divinized by the incarnation of God, in the flesh that He took from woman.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> In spite of innumerable vulgarizations of Freudian sexology, most of which are hasty and superficial, it is surprising that there are so few serious theological works which deal with this question. Mention can be made, however, of Derrick Sherwin Bailey's fine study. *The Man-Woman Relation in Christian Thought*, London, 1959.