

The Women's Movement: An EXODUS COMMUNITY

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Sisters and other esteemed members of the congregation:

There are many ways of refusing to see a problem—such as the problem of the oppression of women by society in general and religion in particular. One way is to make it appear trivial. For example, one hears: "Are you on that subject of women again when there are so many important problems—like war, racism, pollution of the environment." One would think, to hear this, that there is no connection between sexism and the rape of the Third World, the rape of the Blacks, or the rape of land and water. Another way of refusing to see the problem of the oppression of women is to particularize it. For instance, one hears: "Oh, that's a Catholic problem. The Catholic church is so medieval." One would imagine, to listen to this, that there is no patriarchy around here. Another method of refusing to see is to spiritualize, that is, to refuse to look at concrete oppressive facts. There is a significant precedent for this in Christian history: Paul wrote that "in Christ there is neither male nor female," but was not exactly concerned about social equality for women. The repetition of that famous line from Paul by would-be pacifiers of women invites the response that even if "in Christ there is neither male nor female," everywhere else there damn well is. Finally, some people, especially academics, attempt to make the problem disappear by universalizing it. One frequently hears: "But isn't the real problem *human* liberation?" The difficulty with this is that the words spoken may be "true," but when used to avoid the issue of sexism they are radically untruthful.

There *is* a problem. It is this: There exists a world-wide phenomenon of sexual caste, which is to be found not only in Saudi Arabia but also in Sweden. This planetary sexual caste system involves birth-ascribed, hierarchically ordered groups whose members have unequal access to goods, services, prestige, and physical and mental well-being. This exploitative system is masked by sex role segregation. Thus it is possible for a woman with a Ph.D. to fail to recognize any inequity in church regulations which forbid her to serve Mass while permitting a seven year old retarded boy to do so. Sexual caste is masked also by women's duality of status, for women have a derivative status stemming from relationships with men, which serves to hide our inhuman condition *as women*. Finally, it is masked by ideologies and institutions that alienate women from our true selves, deluding us with false identifications, sapping our energies, deflecting our anger and our hope.

It is easy, then, to fail to see the problem of sexual caste. Moreover, patriarchal religion has made it more difficult to see through the injustices of the system by legitimating and reinforcing it. The long history of legitimation of sexism by religion is too well known to require detailed repetition here. I need not recite those infamous Pauline passages on women. I need not allude to the misogynism of the church Fathers—for example, Tertullian, who informed women in general: "You are the devil's gateway,"

or Augustine, who opined that women are not made to the image of God. I can omit reference to Thomas Aquinas and his numerous commentators and disciples who defined women as misbegotten males. I can overlook Martin Luther's remark that God created Adam lord over all living creatures but Eve spoiled it all. I can pass over the fact that John Knox composed a "First Blast of the Trumpet against the Monstrous Regiment of Women." All of this, after all, is past history.

Perhaps, however, we should take just a cursory glance at more recent history. Pope Pius XII more or less summarized official ecclesiastical views on women when he wrote that "the mother who complains because a new child presses against her bosom seeking nourishment at her breast is foolish, ignorant of herself, and unhappy." In another address he remarked that "she loves it the more, the more pain it has cost her." It may be objected, however, that in the year 1970 the official Catholic position leaped into the twentieth century, for in that year chaste lay women (c-h-a-s-t-e) willing to take vows of chastity were offered special consecration in what was called the answer to the modern world's obsession with sex. . . . The question unasked was: Just *whose* obsession is this?

Meanwhile on the Protestant front things have not really been that different. Theologian Karl Barth proclaimed that woman is ontologically subordinate to man as her "head." Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his famous *Letters and Papers from Prison*, in which he had proclaimed the attack of Christianity upon the adulthood of the world to be pointless, ignoble, and unchristian—in this very same volume—insists that women should be subject to their husbands.

Theology which is overtly and explicitly oppressive to women is by no means a thing of the past. Exclusively masculine symbolism for God, for the notion of divine "incarnation" in human nature, and for the human relationship to God reinforces sexual hierarchy. Tremendous damage is done, particularly in ethics, when theologians construct one-dimensional arguments that fail to take women's experience into account. This is evident in biased ethical arguments concerning abortion—for example, those of some well-known professors at this university. To summarize briefly the situation: The entire conceptual apparatus of theology, developed under the conditions of patriarchy, has been the product of males and serves the interests of sexist society.

To a large extent in recent times the role of the church in supporting the sexual caste system has been assumed by psycho-analysis. Feminists have pointed out that it is by no accident that Freudian theory emerged as the first wave of feminism was cresting. This was part of the counterrevolution, the male backlash. Psychoanalysis has its own creeds, priesthood, spiritual counseling, its rules, anathemas, and jargon. Its power of psychological intimidation is enormous. Millions who might smile at being labeled "heretic" or "sinful" for refusing to conform to the norms of sexist society can be cowed and kept in line by the labels "sick," "neurotic," or "unfeminine." This Mother Church of contemporary secular patriarchal religions has sent its missionaries everywhere, not excluding the traditional churches themselves.

It isn't "prudent" for women to see all of this. Seeing means that everything changes: the old identifications and the old securities are gone. Therefore the ethic that is emerging in the women's movement is not an ethic of prudence but one whose dominant theme is existential courage. This is the courage to *see* and to *be* in the face of the nameless anxieties that surface when a woman begins to see through the masks of sexist society and to confront the horrifying fact of her own alienation from her authentic self.

The courage to be and to see that is emerging in the women's revolution expresses itself in sisterhood—an event which is new under the sun. The so-called "sisterhoods" of patriarchy were and are in fact mini-brotherhoods, serving male interests and ideals. The ladies' auxiliaries of political parties, college sororities, religious orders of nuns—all have served the purposes of sexist society. In contrast to these, the new sisterhood is the bonding of women for liberation from sex role socialization. The very word itself says liberation and revolution.

There is no reason to think that sisterhood is easy. Women suffer from a duality of consciousness, as do the members of all oppressed groups. That is, we have internalized the image that males have created of "the woman," and this is in constant conflict with our authentically striving selves. One of the side effects of this duality is a kind of paralysis of the will. This is sometimes experienced as fear of ridicule, or of being considered abnormal, or—more basically—simply of being rejected, unwanted, unloved. Other effects of this dual consciousness are self-depreciation and emotional dependence. All of this is expressed in feminine antifeminism—the direction by women of our self-hatred toward each other. Each of us has internalized the "male chauvinist pig." It exists inside our heads and it is a devil that must be exorcised and exterminated. How can we do this? For women, the first salvific moment comes when we realize the fact of our exploitation and oppression. But—and this is an important "but"—unless the insight gives birth to externalized action it will die. This externalized action, or *praxis*, authenticates insight and creates situations out of which new knowledge can grow. It must relate to the building of a new community, to the bonding of women in sisterhood.

Sisterhood is both revolutionary and revelatory. By refusing—together—to be objects, we can break down the credibility of sex stereotyping and bring about a genuine psychic revolution. By the same token, sisterhood is revelation. The plausibility of patriarchal religion is weakening. Nietzsche, the prophet, asked: "What are these churches now if they are not the tombs and sepulchres of God?" Nietzsche's misogyny did not permit him to see that the God who had to die was the patriarchal tyrant. Women who are "getting it together" are beginning to see that as long as God is imaged exclusively as male, then the male can feel justified in playing God. The breakdown of the idols of patriarchal religion, then, is consequent upon women's new consciousness. Out of our courage to be in the face of the absence of these idols—in the face of the experience of non-being—can emerge a new sense of transcendence, that is, a new and more genuine religious consciousness. This means that a transvaluation of values can take place. Faith, instead of being blind acceptance of doctrines handed down by authority, can be a state of ultimate concern that goes beyond bigotry. Hope, instead of being reduced to passive expectation of a reward for following rules allegedly set down by the Father and his surrogates, can be a communal creation of the future. Love, instead of being abject acceptance of exploitation, can become clean and free, secure in the knowledge that the most loving thing we can do in an oppressive situation is to work against the structures that destroy both the exploited and the exploiter. The transvaluation of values that is implied in the revolution of sisterhood touches the very meaning of human life itself. It may be the key to turning our species away from its course of destroying life on this planet.

Sisterhood, then, is in a very real sense an anti-church. In creating a counter-world to the society endorsed by patriarchal religion women are at war with sexist religion *as*

sexist. This is true whether we concern ourselves directly with religion or not. Women whose consciousness has been raised are spiritual exiles whose sense of transcendence is seeking alternative expressions to those available in institutional religion.

Sisterhood is also functioning as church, proclaiming dimensions of truth which organized religion fails to proclaim. It is a space set apart, in which we can be ourselves, free of the mendacious contortions of mind, will, and feeling demanded of us "out there." It is a charismatic community, in which we experience prophecy and healing. It is a community with a mission to challenge the distortions in sexually unbalanced society, to be a counter-force to the prevailing sense of reality by building up a new sense of reality. Finally, sisterhood is an *exodus community* that goes away from the land of our fathers—leaving that behind because of the promise in women that is still unfulfilled. It is an exodus community that, perhaps for the first time in history, is putting our own cause—the liberation of women—*first*. It is a positive refusal to be co-opted any more—a positive refusal based on the prophetic insight that the sisterhood of women opens out to universal horizons, pointing outward to the sisterhood of man.

Sisters:

The sisterhood of man cannot happen without a real exodus. We have to go out from the land of our fathers into an unknown place. We can this morning demonstrate our exodus from sexist religion—a break which for many of us has already taken place spiritually. We can give physical expression to our exodus community, to the fact that we must go away.

We cannot really belong to institutional religion as it exists. It isn't good enough to be token preachers. It isn't good enough to have our energies drained and co-opted. Singing sexist hymns, praying to a male god breaks our spirit, makes us less than human. The crushing weight of this tradition, of this power structure, tells us that *we do not even exist*.

The women's movement is an exodus community. Its basis is not merely in the promise given to our fathers thousands of years ago. Rather its source is in the unfulfilled promise of our mothers' lives, whose history was never recorded. Its source is in the promise of our sisters whose voices have been robbed from them, and in our own promise, our latent creativity. We can affirm *now* our promise and our exodus as we walk into a future that will be our *own* future.

Sisters—and brothers, if there are any here: Our time has come. We will take our own place in the sun. We will leave behind the centuries of silence and darkness. Let us affirm our faith in our-selves and our will to transcendence by rising and walking out together.