

Women and Men After Christendom

Introduction

Women and Men After Christendom:
The Dis-Ordering of Gender Relationships

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I moved house recently. In this new house, my husband and I each have our own room. We have taken the two smaller bedrooms and made them both into studies. One of these rooms is bigger than the other – not by very much, but obviously so on opening the doors. I have the bigger study.

We had a removal firm help us with the move. The team of three men moved our desks into our respective rooms, brought in the bookcases, lining up the furniture where we asked, and then began bringing in the boxes of books, papers and computer equipment. I stood at the top of the stairs indicating which carefully labelled box should be taken into which room.

Part way through these ‘box runs’, one of the team came out of my room and asked me, without any humour, irony, sarcasm, hint of friendly banter, or cheek, ‘Why do you have the bigger study?’ This was a highly gendered question. His question was not so much one of curiosity as it was of bafflement. Something clearly did not add up for him, and despite his otherwise professional manner, he was compelled to cross the boundary into asking for a justification of our choice of room allocation.

Somewhat taken aback, I gave a highly gendered answer. I did indeed attempt to justify the situation, and in doing so accepted his assumption that there was something about this arrangement that was questionable. So, rather than replying with another question, ‘Why shouldn’t I?’, I simply said that I worked from home so spent more time in my home study and that my husband had an office at work. In other words, in terms of square footage, he had the larger space than me, albeit in two locations. I was giving reassurance, not to worry, all is in order in the world, just as it should be, with of course the man having the greater space.

All of us live lives impacted by gendered thinking and structures, however much – or little – we are aware of this. This book is about gender – about how women and men relate together. It consciously explores historical, theological and social influences that have shaped the social relations between women and men.

While I was finishing writing this book I had a conversation with a 19-year-old student. He was finding his chosen course of study frustrating because he felt it was focused on how to get a job in his field rather than the ‘whys and wherefores’ of his subject. Something of a self-taught philosopher, he was interested in the bigger picture that he felt was missing. He told me about life as a student, some of the things that had brought him to this point, and what he hoped he might do in the future.

He then asked me what I did when I left school. I briefly outlined what had brought me to the point of being involved in social and theological research and some of the things I had done. ‘Do you have faith yourself?’, he wanted to know. I replied yes, I was a Christian and so I was an ‘insider’ to much of the work I did. His response was immediate: ‘But don’t you find Christianity really offensive to women?’

I asked him to tell me what had led him to say this. He was very clear. Men wrote the Bible to tell women what to do, to keep them unequal. And that was what all religion was – it was about controlling people, keeping them in their place. In his sharp critique of what he thought about Christianity, he summed up the focus of this book, which is looking at the relationship of women and men in the light of the shift to post-Christendom.

The term ‘post-Christendom shift’ refers to how we are moving away from a situation where the church has religious, social and political power which can be imposed upon others to one in which Christians witness to the gospel by the way they live, not by the power they wield. This book is concerned with what this new understanding and practice might mean for relationships between women and men, which throughout Christendom have followed a hierarchically ordered gender pattern. The dis-ordering of the book’s subtitle is not about advocating chaos, but about dismantling this pattern of male dominance and female subordination.

While the transition to post-Christendom may at times feel disorienting as the church and Christians are dislocated from a privileged centre in society to a more marginal and peripheral status, it is also an opportunity to re-imagine ourselves differently. This is no less so in terms of the social relations between women and men. Can considering this age-old conversation in the emerging light of a post-Christendom framework offer us fresh or renewed insight?

In this re-imagining, I share with the student the pull of the bigger picture. Therefore, this is not so much a ‘how to’ book, but a ‘why we should’ book. It does not provide models to follow, but seeks to expose the nature of the challenge. This is partly because understanding something of the dynamics of Christendom’s gender hierarchy is necessary if we are to move beyond it, if we are to have more than superficial attempts to live as women and men after Christendom. And it is partly because I believe such living will look different depending on particular situations. A witness to re-imagined relationships will involve diversity as much as it does innovation. This diversity itself will be an implicit challenge to the highly restrictive gender order bound up in Christendom thinking and behaving.

So imprinted on us is a Christendom order of gender that the first difficulty we face is trying to think outside of its constraints. To help us to do this, and to remove ambiguity over some of the terms used in this book, Chapter 1 begins with making plain a number of contexts in which our consideration takes place. It introduces the breadth of the notion of Christendom and the importance of its integral idea of order, which I am challenging in this book. It notes how patriarchy – which includes a hierarchy of males over females – is enmeshed within Christendom; hence, the ethos of empire is sustained by women’s subordination. A discussion of the terms sex and gender, and sexuality, affirms the value of our embodiment as women and men while highlighting the way sexual distinction has been used to structure inequality in terms of belief, value and behaviour.

The chapter finishes with a note on hermeneutics, which I use both in a broad and more particular sense in this book. Broadly speaking, hermeneutics is about the framework we use for interpreting our world; a Christendom framework is one of a divinely ordered hierarchy (the word hierarchy comes from the Greek hieros meaning sacred and arche meaning rule). This contrasts with the frameworks of equality and friendship that are discussed in later chapters. In a more specific sense, biblical hermeneutics is about how we interpret the Bible, crucial for any discussion on gender relationships. But centuries of being told that the Scriptures prescribe patriarchal gender norms have left us unable to see that the biblical narratives actually contain challenges to such norms.

Chapter 2, therefore, explores the New Testament, both gospels and epistles, to tease out an unfolding narrative of groups of believers who were wrestling with the impact of their experiences on their social and political relations, including that of gender. The patriarchy of the world before

Christendom was entangled with the Roman Empire (as it would be with the Christian empire that followed). The Christian claim, therefore, of belonging to a new community in God, rather than identifying with family, religious, political or national allegiances, was disturbing to the existing social and indeed sacral order. It questioned the usual social conventions of marriage, kin and household that structured the lives of women and men, particularly in the light of the expected imminent return of Jesus. The image of God as father was a direct challenge to the place of all patriarchs, whether in kin networks, households, or as heads of states. Its significance is not as a male as opposed to female metaphor, but as a picture that confounds systems of domination. A challenge in the world of the first Christians, it has the potential to continue to be a challenge to Christendom thinking, both past and present.

The chapter traces some of the diversity among believers in the first churches as they adjusted to the realities of a prolonged period of living in 'the last days' in the midst of mainstream society and culture, which, of course, had nurtured and formed them before their encounter with Christ. The emerging organizational structures of the church developed in the second and third centuries to a dominant patriarchal pattern, but not without well-attested counter traditions. Such counter traditions continued throughout the Christendom period, despite various attempts to obscure them.

It is the impact of Christendom on the relationship between women and men that I turn to in Chapter 3. Whatever his motivation, the decision of the emperor Constantine at the start of the fourth century to favour Christianity within his empire not only brought an end to the persecution previously experienced by the church. It also began a realignment of Christianity from the margins to the centre of the state and its power. To help illustrate the enormity of this change, I begin the chapter with a broader view of the impact of this mainstreaming of Christianity in the empire, including how religious orthodoxy became enforced with the power of the state. I then look at three dynamics through which the enmeshment of the church with the trappings of empire impacted on gender relations.

The first of these is the solidifying of the division between clergy and laity, with an increasing move to a priesthood that was not only male, but also celibate, and one that church authorities put much energy and law into enforcing. This spiritual and social hierarchy between clerics and laity relied on and reinforced negative and detrimental views of women – their physicality and their intellectual and moral capacities, for even celibate living was insufficient to bestow on women the purity that would enable them to serve at the altar. Second, the chapter considers the impact of the Reformation's understanding of the relationship between family, church and state. The Reformers' renegotiation of the relationship between sexuality and holiness that saw them closing convents and monasteries and promoting clerical marriage was imbued with patriarchal ideology. Marriages, and particularly those of the clergy, became 'the showcase of Christian living', and foundational to this was the authoritative role of the father in the household, which in turn was viewed as an analogy of the state. Women or men stepping outside of accepted patterns were considered disorderly and a threat to society's wellbeing.

Chapter 3 finishes looking at a third dynamic underpinning the first two: Christian understandings of sex and sexuality. In particular, the double standard inherent in much Christian sexual ethics not only has seen women more associated than men with humanity's sexual nature, but also viewed them as more culpable than men for humanity's sexual failings. The outworking of this dynamic may have presented itself differently over the centuries, but sexual ethics remains core to Christian self-understanding up to the present day. It is possible to see contemporary churches' struggles to maintain more traditional structuring of relations between women and men as attempts to maintain a distinctive Christian identity in the context of their declining power and influence in a post-Christendom world.

Chapter 4 considers a more recent and continuing response to patriarchal and Christendom gender order – the discourse of equality. Equality is a framework for envisioning the relationship between women and men that does not put them in subordinate and dominant positions. Rather, it challenges the values and the practices that perpetuate such arrangements, whether in domestic settings or public institutions. To survey the progress in equality that women have gained in various ways in the twentieth century is to realize that gains have come slowly and been imperfectly implemented. Failure to address the deeper ways that gender inequality is structured in both personal and public life has inhibited greater equality while at the same time giving a general impression that sufficient equality has been achieved. However, among other achievements, women's movements have succeeded in putting male behaviour and privilege under a spotlight. The response to this has been an identifiable men's movement, including a spectrum from the therapeutic mythopoeticism of Iron John to pro-feminist White Ribbon campaigns that focus on ending male violence against women.

Christian responses to the contemporary context of equality are dominated by the discourse of the feminization of the church. This chapter explores this conversation and the responses, epitomized by the Promise Keepers in the USA, that focus on how men might be engaged in Christian and church life. It suggests that the opportunities for personal growth that men are experiencing (and their female partners are often valuing) through such responses should not stop a more in-depth critical analysis of the discourse of feminization. A historical perspective on so-called feminization enables us to see how, from the eighteenth century, patriarchy has been adapting through various social changes, re-inventing itself but keeping a gender hierarchy intact, despite rhetoric to the contrary. The chapter concludes that equality is a demanding ethic, both personally and socially and, while perhaps not the most natural language for theology, one that finds resonance with the life of Jesus and the practice of the first churches.

It is theological imagination that is thought about in Chapter 5. The sense we make of the transcendent reality of God in our lives shapes our human communities. This is no less so for gender relations. When we say that humanity is made in the image of God but the chief human images we draw on to picture God are male, while at the same time finding it deeply disturbing, for example, to refer to God as 'she', this has implications for the relationship between women and men. Our gender-exclusive language reveals what is often denied, that we situate femaleness differently to maleness in terms of the relationship to deity, and this has implications for how women and men are situated with each other. Our theological imagination determines our social gender relations.

Of course, the unique image of God we have is Jesus, and Chapter 5 goes on to ask what meaning we are to take from the fact that Jesus was male. Contrary to much focus on the significance of Jesus' sex, I suggest the key question here is not whether God could have become incarnate as a woman. Rather, it is whether there is anything about women and femaleness that means they are not suitable to image the divine. I explore this question through reflecting on responses to encountering artistic portrayals of a crucified Christ in female form. The visceral reactions that such representations provoke tell us much about the underlying symbolism that structures our theology and our gendered social organization.

The crucified Christ, of course, has a central place within Christian tradition. Here too, theological imagination has had a profound impact on how women and men relate. Frequently, Jesus' submission to his own suffering has been used to encourage or coerce women to accept the suffering and injustice they encounter – not least from male abuse and violence, but also from patriarchal social systems that treat women unfairly – rather than to challenge it. Finally, therefore, Chapter 5 revisits the meaning of the cross, suggesting that its role in endorsing suffering cannot be accounted for simply as a perversion of Christian theology. Such meaning derived from the death of Christ is, rather, imbued with the legacy of Christendom understandings of atonement, which

developed in the medieval period when cross and sword combined to coerce Christian political and religious allegiance.

The focus of Chapter 6 is on the Bible and in particular the New Testament. The overwhelming tendency has been to understand gender relations on the basis of a select number of New Testament verses, sometimes called the ‘hard passages’. In contrast to this contracted approach, I suggest an expansive threefold way of reading the New Testament when thinking about the relation between women and men. First, this means letting the whole text inform our understanding of gender relations. This involves making gender visible where it has been absent from our reading and discovering about gender relations in unexpected places. Second, it means bearing in mind the breadth of church life, experience and dialogue that we meet in the New Testament and joining in that conversation ourselves. These two approaches provide the context for the third way of reading that I suggest, which is a close-up look at the so-called ‘hard passages’. These verses remain important to explore, but through engaging in an expansive approach to New Testament reading, we open ourselves up to new encounters with these texts.

In effect, Chapter 2 consists of the first two approaches so in Chapter 6 I focus on the third approach, illustrating it by considering 1 Timothy 2:8–15. These verses have been used as the definitive, authoritative verdict confirming women’s subordination but, as I demonstrate, it is not only possible but more plausible to read them differently.

In the light of centuries of gender relations that have been characterized by antagonism, I suggest, in Chapter 7, that we use the notion of friendship to think of women and men, not just or even primarily as individuals, but as a paradigm for thinking about humanity as female and male. By drawing on ancient practices of friendship – which contrast with contemporary ones, but which also are partially subverted to new ends in the New Testament – I propose this motif offers us a qualitatively different approach to a Christendom mindset of power and control.

Finally, I return to the bigger picture with which I began and a reminder of how Christendom’s patriarchal gender order shapes all our lives. I do so with the hope that Christian communities, in grasping the importance of giving attention to gender, will creatively engage in their own dis-ordering of gender relationships