

# Justice: The Hard Line

By: ELIZABETH FARIANS

The fundamental issue of the women's liberation movement is justice. What this has to do with religion is that religion is supposed to be most of all about justice. Therefore religion ought to be actively involved wherever justice is at stake.

## Religion and Justice

Many examples could be cited in support of this view of religion.<sup>1</sup> It would seem that while this was a controversial view not too long ago many religious persons now argue that religion should be socially oriented. And yet in these days when it is permissible and even popular to criticize religion, that institutional religion is not socially oriented is one of the major complaints. Institutional religion seems to arrive late on almost every scene of injustice. In many cases, institutional religion has even been an obstacle to social progress and justice. This church pattern has proved true for women's liberation as well. It is difficult to find official church statements which show interest and concern for the status of women.<sup>2</sup> That the situation of women has been (until very recently) worsening seems to indicate that either the church has not gotten involved in this field of human misery or that it has failed in its attempt to do so.<sup>3</sup> There is almost no evidence for the latter.

## *Discrimination against Women in the Church*

For the women's liberation movement and the church the connection of justice has several aspects. Not only has religion failed to be a leader in the liberation of women in the secular society but women are discriminated against within religion itself both in the same way as in wider society<sup>4</sup> and in a special way. Religion discriminates against women in its doctrine, practice and law. This injustice in turn reinforces the discrimination in the wider society by seeming to give it divine approval.

In most other movements for social justice the argument used to curtail whatever enthusiasm existed for religious justice was that the church should be otherworldly. This argument was often made by those with vested interests in this world. This also happens to the women's movement. Many males, both ecclesiastical and secular, have vested interests in the oppression of women. This argument has been discredited, and in other movements we can see the results: many religious persons are active in the causes of our time.

## *Antagonism between Women's Liberation and the Church*

The problem which is special to the women's liberation movement is more complicated. The Judean-Christian religion which we have inherited and which has shaped the Western world is misogynistic both by being antiwoman and by being womanless, i.e., by the absence of the feminine principle. The result for religion is over masculinization and the result for women is seriously unjust discrimination which affects every aspect of their lives. The overall result now with the so-called "second" wave of feminism is a deep and fundamental antagonism between women's liberation and the church. The problem before us is how to deal with this antagonism.

In the past the problem has been met in several ways. One was to declare that God has ordained woman a place in life: that of child bearer and consequently housewife. In this role she has a fitting and important function. Through childbearing and under the protective custody of her husband, woman could overcome the disability of femaleness and become pleasing to God. Although some males argued against it, some men did argue that women could "be saved." This was the traditional response of Christianity. It was an improvement over some primitive views which held women to be nothing more than chattel. At least as mother woman had some respect and status. Even today women are sometimes reluctant to relinquish their claim to a "divinely ordained" function because it has been their only title to status. The critique of this argumentation is obvious. It assumes that there is a once-and-for-all divine plan and that the plan can be known. It also assumes that the plan is good because it comes from God. These assumptions present a number of fundamental problems with which theologians and philosophers have struggled for a long time. The reason for drawing the problems out so

explicitly here is that few scholars (most of the scholarly writings we have are of reportedly male authorship) have dealt with these problems precisely as they affect women. For example, what agnostic has extended his theory to include the traditional role of women?

For women this method of dealing with the problem is not all bad. As mentioned earlier it gives women some status. But women cannot advance under this theory. Their status is based on function; i.e., woman has status as mother, not as woman. Woman and the feminine can still be seen as evil or inferior. Even the status of woman as mother is set. Her role is determined. It cannot change or be enlarged to include other areas of life. For example, there is no injustice in paying more salary to men than women for the same work or no injustice is involved in refusing to employ women when men are available. It is permissible to exclude women from the mainstream of life. Women can be made dependent on men economically, physically, spiritually and socially. No injustice is involved in keeping woman in her place. It is, in fact, the women's liberation movement which is wrong, which is the cause of the seeming antagonism.

When women chafe under this philosophy even though it is supposed to be "good" for them to be in a subservient position, one of two further refinements is added to the first rather simplistic principle. The first is stated as a religious ideal: it is noble to suffer; to endure pain in God's name is salvific; to be humble and patient is to be Christlike. This is, of course, the same theory which has tended to anesthetize the Christian poor for centuries.

The second has been invented especially for women. It is their nature to be in subjection. To be feminine is to be humble and submissive. Suffering is not only woman's lot and hence pleasing to God, but women have a special capacity to endure suffering. It is their nature to suffer. With this added sophistication women's liberation is said to be unnatural. Again the question of justice does not arise.

Women have not always accepted these lines of reasoning. Even though women were almost without exception uneducated and not able easily to challenge the male system, their common sense was sharpened by oppression and some women saw that such reasoning was not valid. (Of course the history of this protest is outside the scope of this paper.)

As the feminine protest gathered strength and women began to be conscious of themselves as persons a new and more subtle theory was necessary to keep them under control. This theory is often called the "eternal feminine" or "feminine mystique." In this view women are equal (or even superior) to men but also different from men. While there is no such thing as equal but different, this theory nevertheless brought women some advance. Now her status did not just depend on function. She could claim some inherent goodness, although this goodness was "a little less than" man's. Suffering is not her only mode of being. Women can do some active things, although not the same things as men. Women are still kept out of the mainstream of life. If a woman happens to do the same thing as a man (which is permitted only by way of exception and in extenuating circumstances) and if she does that thing well, she is said to have done it "pretty good for a woman" or to have done it "like a man." In this theory, motherhood is still the decisive factor. To be a woman is equated with being wife and mother.

This theory is still very popular with women. After all it raised women from a position of abnegation to a status with some possibility. Women are not stupid. This was an advancement in a world where full equality seemed impossible. But the theory is deadly. Under it full equality is made impossible. The equal but different theory is a contradiction.

Women have been sold a bill of goods by such thinking. By being told how special they are, they have been deterred from desiring equality. If a careful examination and comparison is made of the qualities and abilities which are attributed to men as opposed to those attributed to women, it becomes obvious that the attributes held to be superior in our society are generally said to be male while those qualities which are said to be female are usually held in less esteem. (A full critique of this position is beyond the scope of this paper.)

To be noted here also is that because of this masculine and feminine division of attributes, many false values have developed in our society. There has developed an over-glorification of the so-called masculine qualities to the detriment of the entire society.

In the theory of the feminine mystique no injustice is involved because the scales of justice cannot weigh difference. Equality is not the issue. Another way to deal with the conflict between the women's movement and the church is to try to show there is no real disagreement. This method has been possible only since modern

biblical studies broke through our static and fundamentalistic view of religion. Now that we see that many bible stories are myths, that much of our tradition is culturally conditioned, that there is a theory of on-going revelation, and now that we understand the human male imagination developed much of our doctrine, we can begin to try to point out what is in agreement in our cultural background and the liberation of women. A number of scholarly studies of this type has appeared.<sup>5</sup>

These writings have served a useful purpose. Even the NOW Task Force on Women and Religion sells a "Jesus was a Feminist" button. Although this approach is inadequate, it harmonizes women's liberation and religion so that the fear and guilt many persons feel if they criticize or attack religion is diminished. Thus they become more free objectively to examine the value of woman's liberation. They are relieved to find they can investigate women's liberation without risking the divine wrath. If they are ever seriously to consider women's liberation, most religious persons will have to go through this stage of thinking about the relationship of women's liberation and theology.

The secularists of the women's liberation movement did not go through this last step. Somewhere they turned away from religion because they felt it was irrelevant to life as they knew it. Most of the organizers of the feminist movement in the 1960's were secularists, convinced God was dead and that religion was not influential in American culture.<sup>6</sup> But these secularists are not the majority of the women of America. But those women who have religious enthusiasm could do much to speed up the process of liberation and see that women's liberation remains committed to the best humanistic values. The real majority of women in America, I believe, are somewhere in the middle, between being secularists and being actively committed to religion, but they have been and many still are, influenced by institutional religion.

One of the difficulties with trying to harmonize religion and women's liberation is that it will take too long. This approach involves a re-examination of so much theology and so many scripture texts have to be justified before the women's movement could be said or before it is proved to the satisfaction of the academic "purists" that women's liberation should be permitted, let alone encouraged. In fact, the debate might be endless since the mostly male scholars would be starting with the anti-feminine bias of their science.<sup>7</sup> It could become a vicious circle. Thus the fate of womankind could be made to depend on debate and argumentation. What is right, truth and justice, do not always win out whether the battle is verbal or physical. If Christianity is argued to be inherently anti-feminine, then Christian women cannot be liberated. They must remain in a subordinate and subservient position.

Also women's liberation could be sidetracked by debate about some esoteric or fundamental problem of religion which in the long run may be insoluble. Very often persons who do not want to feel the need to get involved in some social concern argue that every principle, down to the first principle on which the case rests, and every detail, no matter how indirectly related, must be absolutely clear before action can be taken. In the real world things are not like this. These academics often use this to excuse themselves from responsibility for action. It is the educated and socially aware conscience which can discern when there is enough evidence to act.

There is another classification of interested people who are somewhere in between on the argument that women's liberation stands on justice and those who try to justify our religious tradition. These persons want to change the structure of the church. They find the church so decadent and corrupt that they would not want women to become involved. Some say they would not want women to be sullied by bad structures and some say that they would not want women to get into these structures, thereby possibly prolonging their existence. Men, they say, are finally beginning to see how restrictive are these structures. These persons are happy when the men leave the structures because it hastens their collapse. These persons do not want women to step in and slow down the collapse.

It is also, incidentally, interesting to note how a few of the male hierarchy now argue for a place for women in the church. They want women to fill the vacancies men have left only to prevent the collapse of the structures. These males do not argue on the basis of rights; they argue on the basis of need and they explicitly say this.<sup>8</sup>

Many of us might agree that much of what is called religious is really inauthentic accumulations from the past. We must go back to authentic traditions and find new and refreshing ways to operate. We would also agree that there is a very real danger in fitting into already-corrupt structures. Women can be harmed in this way. In fact one can easily find examples among the "token" or exceptional women who have made it in a

man's world. This argument has its parallel argument in the entire New Left movement. Does one reform or repeal the system? This argument is also the basis for much of the splintering in the wider aspects of the women's movement. NOW is often said to be in the reform business as compared to some feminists who consider themselves to be more radically concerned with change outside the system. Of course in reality these distinctions become more blurred.

Women should be reminded constantly of the difficulty they have experienced in the New Left. When new structures were formed when the new regime of males took over, women usually found themselves still on the outside, still excluded from this new mainstream. In desperation some women became separatists. This same kind of exclusion can be observed in new structures in the church. For example, ecumenism has brought Protestants and non-Christians into official and unofficial Roman Catholic sanctuaries, but such sacral proximity has been reserved for men.<sup>9</sup> In these new liturgies one continually sees males in the cultic roles and women in the peripheral roles.

Regarding the precise problem of the antagonism between women's liberation and the church, there are special nuances about which we need to be aware. The priesthood, especially the Roman Catholic concept of priesthood, is an example. Women have been excluded for a number of reasons. One is male prestige and is the same as the reason women have been excluded from leadership roles in the secular society. Another reason for the exclusion of women is more peculiar to religion (not that these reasons are not related). It is the uncleanness and impurity attributed to women by religion. Hence women are forbidden to enter the sanctuary. Their presence defiles the holy. For this reason it seems necessary for women to break this taboo by becoming priests, by taking up the cultic role and touching the sacred. Until this deep psychological taboo is overcome, there will be lingering doubt about the intrinsic holiness and wholeness of women. As long as the priesthood exists, women must be part of it. They cannot by-pass this office.

Another point which needs to be made is that even though some women may not want to fill the role of priest, especially as priesthood is, nevertheless women cannot reject the role if they cannot truly accept it. So in order to reject the role, the role must be offered to women. A "no" is valid only if it could have been a "yes."

Another aspect of the problem peculiar to religion is the whole system of doctrine and myth which has been developed to support male supremacy. Again simply trying to by-pass this doctrine rather than to attack it directly to show its fallacy leaves room for doubt. It does not settle the problem once and for all.

In talking to some of those who want to direct their energies toward forming new structures rather than toward demolishing the old structures, those who often say they are not primarily concerned about women's liberation because they are concerned about new structures for the whole church, in talking with those people, first of all, my experience usually has been to find them, both women and men, to be followers of the "feminine mystique" philosophy. They tend to hold the "equal-but-different" theory. For example: they would say that when the priesthood changes in its emphasis from cult to ministry, and is thus feminized, then that role will be more fitting for women, the opposition to women in the priesthood will disappear and women will naturally take up this new ministry. So these people struggle to change the priesthood rather than to get women into it.

One might think that this is just another way to attack the problem of women's liberation. But secondly we must point out that it really is not, because the theory does not attack the problem at its heart. Such a solution does not recognize that in order to be free one must have choice. To be free means to be able, to have available for choice, the bad as well as the good. To be free one must even be able to choose sin. By withholding the priesthood from women now, while the priesthood is "bad" according to the evaluation of those whose strategy we have been discussing, those persons are protecting women and hence restricting them. The freedom of choice is denied to women. This is what freedom means; to deny this freedom to women is unjust. Again it seems women cannot by-pass the problem. They must attack it head-on.

There is another real danger lurking here. As women become increasingly conscious of their oppression and as they awaken to personhood, organize and demand their rights, some clever churchmen may devise a new way to hold women down. These men may try to co-opt the women into various mini-ministries. I have warned about this before especially in regard to the diaconate.<sup>10</sup> Other mini-ministries may be developed to drain off the anger of women, ministries where men and women will be "separate but equal." There are already signs that this may happen. If women must therefore be prepared. The difficulty will be in deciding when something is

co-optation and when it is really an advancement for women. To make the proper determination women will have to confer among themselves as these occasions arise.

As we analyze all these various arguments about women in the church, it becomes more and more clear that the basic problem is justice. Any and all these theories, approaches (or excuses) to the problem are inadequate. They do not address the problem at the root: justice. Thus they allow debate to occur within religion. These approaches fail to pin-point the inherent contradiction between true religion and injustice. Unless the argument for women's liberation in the church is based on justice, both women and the church suffer and there will be endless quibbling and exception claimed.

### *Justice: The Hard Line*

This is the hard line. The core of the problem is justice. The principle is clear; women must have their rights because it is right. This argument undercuts every other argument.

This argument leaves no room for debate about the nature of woman, whether femininity is endemic or the result of socialization, what femininity means, whether some characteristics are feminine, etc., etc. This argument also cares not that the church would benefit from the talents and gifts of the many women who generously want to serve. Now when men are beginning to realize that women have talents which they could use and even when some men are beginning to acknowledge it, the use of women's talents cannot be the basic title for rights.

The basic argument for women's rights is justice. The hardness of the line is most evident in relation to the church. The church itself, i.e., its doctrine, practice and law, cannot be excepted. Justice does not admit of exception. If something is due, it is due. If women have rights, they have rights in the church the same as anywhere else. Neither does justice admit of diminution. All that is *owed* must be paid.

The church often admonishes others to practice justice while it itself is in disorder. But there can be no exception for the church regarding women's rights. If some religious doctrine seems to be at variance with women's liberation, I suggest it is the doctrine which is false, not justice to women. The line is hard, but justice is a demanding and exacting virtue.

Not everyone will be able to accept the last part of the argument. Many religious persons will say this is too much. They will be offended by it. These persons will say that religious doctrine is from God. It is sacred and hence it is unthinkable that women could demand rights from God. Religious doctrine is superior to everything else; it cannot be subject to women's rights. What is merely human cannot challenge what is divine. But what principle can we use except this one when we try to judge the validity of a religious claim?

Several further points might be offered to ease this hard line.

The first is to remind ourselves again that it is the nature of religion to be just. Either religion is for justice or it is untrue to itself. Either religion fosters life or it is death-giving and false. Either religion promotes human development and well-being or it is destructive and cannot be representative of the true God. This must be kept in mind when we insist that the life, human development and well-being we are talking about is that of women as well as men. Then we can say with clear conviction and without fear or guilt that if Jesus was not a feminist, he was not of God.

This brings us to the next point. The argumentation about women's rights and religion is logical. If there is a conflict between the women's liberation movement and religion, it is religion which must yield, re-examine itself and change. But many simply cannot take this step. They say they cannot "see" that the argument is logical. I would suggest it is because our culture and especially our religion is so anti-women that these persons are incapable of objective evaluation of the arguments. I would further suggest that few arguments are accepted solely as a result of pure intellection.

What I am saying is that most persons are so emotionally biased against women that emotion most probably will have to be added to the other side to enable them to find the truth.

It may well be that for the most part only those women who have suffered oppression and are somehow now aware of it, and a few men who have "experienced" oppression vicariously through some woman they love will be the ones able to accept the hard line. Despite the possibility that many will resist women's rights as a result of the hard line, I stress the need for arguing primarily on this basis-because of all the reasons I have

previously outlined. Rights for rights' sake is the only argument that cuts through the other arguments. This is what it comes down to in the final analysis. I have verified this over and over again in my own practical experience. As I have fought for women's rights in the streets and on the sidewalks, in sit-ins and sit-outs, I have learned that justice is the core of the issue.

Another point which may ease the hard line is to make as clear as possible what is meant by women's rights. When women demand their rights what is meant is that human rights are due to women as they are due to men. Conflict of rights of many types can arise. These conflicts are resolved in the same way they are resolved when there is a problem with the rights of men (males). There are several aspects of this which must also be clarified. For example, I am not saying that the male is the norm for the female. I am not arguing this point at all. What I am saying is that the application of human rights to the male person is the only norm we have and while the history of this application may not be perfect, it is the standard we have. Women are not a class to be treated differently from men. The term person must be applied to women just as truly and just as fully as it applies to men (males). When conflicts of rights arise as for example between the common good and the private good, the individual woman has the same title to right as does the individual man. No more, no less.

Two problems remain. One is about justice itself. For some reason some people seem to feel apologetic about demanding justice. It has become more popular to extol charity. But justice is a beautiful virtue. Justice is the basis of charity. We must begin with justice.

Justice has other important characteristics. One not already mentioned is action. Justice is an active virtue. One must do something about justice. It permits no delay nor procrastination. One risks being unjust by failing to act.

### *The Next Step*

The last question to arise is where do we go from here? If religion must embrace women's rights and even change when conflict arises, will religion go out of existence? Will the women's movement destroy religion? This is the next step to which we must all address ourselves. In her moving and scholarly article elsewhere in this issue of the Quarterly, Dr. Mary Daly suggests that women's liberation does in fact have something to give to religion. If we take the hard line we can more quickly get on with it. With justice as our stepping stone, we can break into a whole new world of freedom, beauty and truth.

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#### References:

<sup>1</sup>A remarkable recent statement by the President of Tanzania to the Maryknoll Sisters is reported by Julius Nyerere in the December, 1971, Catholic Worker, p. 1, "World In Revolution."

<sup>2</sup>Concern for women's rights is so rare that feminists tend to keep a careful record. The National Women's Party keeps on hand a supply of copies of the supportive statement made in 194-5 by Dennis Cardinal Dougherty about the Equal Rights Amendment. This has been the only statement by a Roman Catholic bishop in the forty-eight-year struggle for the amendment.

<sup>3</sup> U.S. Department of Labor Statistics, 1968.

<sup>4</sup> Report on the Recruiting, Training and Employment of Women Professional Church Workers. Available from Church Women United. Date: February 26, 1969.

See also: "Sex Role Stereotyping in the Church Curriculum: A Report on the United Methodist Church" by Tilda Norberg, Response Magazine (Nov., 1970), pp. 44 + ff.

<sup>5</sup>Some recent examples follow: "Some Unexplored Parallels to I Cor. 11: 11-12 and Gal. 3:28: The New Testament on the Role of Women" by Madeleine Boucher, Catholic Biblical Quarterly (Jan. 1969), pp. 50-58. "In Defense of St. Paul," an unpublished paper by Jeannette Piccard, prepared for the Episcopal Conference, Notre Dame, Indiana, 1969. "Jesus Was a Feminist" by Leonard Swidler, Catholic World (Jan., 1971), pp. 177-183. "Adam and Eve: Who Shall Rule," by Ruth Hoppin, Women Speaking (July-Sept. 1971).

<sup>6</sup>A report of the founding of the Ecumenical Task Force on Women and Religion of the National Organization for Women, "How NOW Got Religion," NOW archives, illustrates.

<sup>7</sup>"Women As Nigger" by Naomi Weisstein, Psychology Today (Oct., 1969), pp. 20-22. Reprinted by KNOW.

<sup>8</sup>"Interview With Cardinal Suenens" by Desmond O'Grady, National Catholic Reporter (Sept. 25, 1970) and my letter in response: "Suenens On Women's Lib," National Catholic Reporter (Oct. 16, 1970).

See also: "Bishop Welcomes Women In Liturgy," National Catholic Reporter (May 21, 1971),p.4.

<sup>9</sup>One of the more highly publicized affairs was the installation of Cardinal Cooke as Archbishop of New York City Roman Catholic Archdiocese. My critical letter was in the National Catholic Reporter (May I, 1968), "Cooke Installation-Where the Girls Aren't."

<sup>10</sup> "NOW Says: Be Cautious on Deacons," National Catholic Reporter (March 12, 1971), p.20.

<sup>11</sup> "Theologians Recommendation Be Open to Women Deacons" by Sue Cribari, National Catholic Reporter (March 5,1971).

See also: Letter of Bernice McNeela, Co-Chairperson, to the members of the Joint Committee of Organizations Concerned About the Status of Women In the Church, Jan. 3, 1972. The letter reports on the American bishops' meeting on the status of women held in Chicago, Dec. 13,1971.