

Similarly, reflections on interreligious and interfaith marriage and family were made in a joint study document in 1997, emphasizing their role in uniting humankind in a spiritual way as well.

8. PARTNERSHIP AND UNITY

The longest-ever initiative in ecumenical history was conducted on the unity of the Church and the unity of humankind, between 1971 and 1991. It was a Faith and Order (F&O) study on the eschatological promise of the coming Reign of God.

The basic assumption was that the Church is a sacrament, a mystery and a prophetic sign of intimate union with God and of the unity of humankind. In their method of inter-contextualisation, the contexts reciprocally provide the interpretative framework for each other.

They researched unity in today's world (1978), the unity of the Church and the renewal of human community (Lima, 1982), Jesus Christ as the life of the world (Vancouver, 1983) and God's purpose to restore all things into unity in Christ.

The glory of God is humanity fully alive, as IRENÆUS teaches us. The aim of all of us is *theosis* or divination, our human life made God-like in Jesus Christ. Against the politics of death, therefore, we should build the culture of life, reconciliation and healing.

Women and men, too, should be free to live out the gifts which God has given them and to respond to their calling

to share fully in the life and witness of the Church. Women's and men's equal and profound participation, therefore, is not simply a matter of social justice, but also of profound theological integrity.

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David BALL

Gender Empires: Personal, Spiritual, Political

I've always struggled with being a man, especially a white man living in a wealthy land.

Ever since I began high school, I didn't fit in with the other boys; they seemed to me so competitive and judgmental. I hated their attitudes towards women, whom they treated as sexual objects. I was never able to understand their lack of sensitivity to the feelings of others, or to justify their glorification of violence. When I started university six years ago, my life was inextricably altered by feminism.

“COURAGE, MY DAUGHTER”

Feminism, as a critical understanding of gender, suggests that the personal is political and vice-versa. For me, the personal, political and spiritual weave in and out of my life as they do in this story, illuminating new realities, revealing pathways of action.

Jesus was a great feminist activist and a fascinating male role model. One day Jesus is in a massive crowd and everyone is clamouring to hear a word and receive healing. The president of the synagogue, a well-respected male, gets his attention first and Jesus sets off with him. Nothing unusual.

Then it gets interesting. A woman who has been bleeding for 12 years, and is therefore ritually unclean, slips unnoticed out of the crowd, touches Jesus' cloak and is healed.

Jesus stops in his tracks. He senses her presence, despite the throngs of people and all the noise and pushing. “Who was it that touched me? I felt that power had gone out from me.” Of course the woman wouldn't dare to ask him for help directly, since she was shameful: an untouchable who risked polluting anyone she touched.

The healed woman falls at his feet. Jesus addresses her in an unusually intimate way: “Courage, my daughter,” he says, “your faith has saved you; go in peace.”

In blessing his ‘daughter,’ Jesus totally subverts the gender system, in which many women were seen as ‘pollution’ to social and religious purity. Since they were considered defiled, they were to be avoided and ignored. By all accounts this daughter should have been invisible in this surging, male-dominated crowd; certainly not vying for the attention of a famous wandering rabbi, or sneaking up on him (Matthew 9,18-22; Luke 8,40-48).

Many see feminism as a dirty word, or as something once useful but now outdated. It is a misconception, however, that feminism is just a women's movement for equality with men. Rather, it offers us a whole new way of understanding our world—a process of thinking about how our world is and should be.

It starts with gender, but it goes much deeper, opening a space for us to question and resist racism, homophobia, and the global Empire we live in as Christians today. The tools of feminist analysis are crucial for men, women and



Christians if we are to understand our world. In the words of black feminist writer bell hooks, “Feminism is for everybody.”

Feminism is also much more than a human rights issue. Writers like Chandra Talpade MOHANTY argue that the idea of women’s human rights has been too often used to justify colonial violence, allowing Western nations to exercise power over the already exploited. At the same time, critical gender analysis opens our eyes to the urgent need for democratic social change.

A MATTER OF SURVIVAL

Picture a scene in my country, Canada, in June this year. This scene is set in the rainy west coast city of Vancouver, which lies on the edge of the Pacific Ocean and will host the Winter Olympics in 2010.

A van is driving along the road downtown amidst many other cars. Inside are several men, indigenous folk whose cultures were here long before the British and French occupied this land. (Consider what is happening now in Iraq under the United States; the fact of occupation is common to our world. In my country, it has been so for almost 500 years.)

These men are driving their van on their way to teach young people how to hunt and survive in the wilderness. Indigenous youth have the highest rates of suicide, poverty and drug abuse among anyone in Canada, a painful legacy of colonization and the theft of their cultures.

Today, Aboriginals are trying to teach their youth the traditional ways, living respectfully on the land our Creator provides for us. Much has been lost, but many hope to restore some of what has been destroyed. They know this is their only hope of cultural—and spiritual—survival.

Suddenly, this van is surrounded and stormed by dozens of riot police from the anti-terrorism tactical squad set up after September 11, 2001. The police seize their tents, camping equipment and hunting rifles, and throw them in jail.

Let it be clear that this does not happen to white people here. (As Boy Scouts, our survival camping expeditions were thankfully never raided by riot squads. We, of course, were ‘upstanding citizens.’) But this does happen to colonized people, especially those who try to assert their human rights to hunt on their own lands, to pass on the traditional teachings—to survive.

These Native teachers say that they have been under surveillance by the state ever since they opposed logging by massive multinational logging corporations on their own territories.

Already these companies have destroyed most of the ancient old-growth rainforests of British Columbia, with trees older than Europe’s most ancient cathedrals. Many First Nations (a preferred name for Aboriginal peoples here) have vowed to stop them.

If this story seems unrelated to gender, I hope the connection will soon be clear.

HERE I STAND

This story is political and spiritual, but above all it is my own. So here I stand, still confused about my own gender and how I fit into this world. I enjoy the power and privileges of being a man, but inside I don’t identify with that label at all. I want my gender to flow unconstrained into something new. Something that seems less like polar opposites, and more like water in its various states. I want to escape from a gender that perpetuates sexism and the rape of the planet.

My story involves some of the biggest, most powerful and dangerous ideas operating in Western culture. In a world of so much injustice, I find myself privileged in almost every aspect of my identity. Being an educated white male, and an economically comfortable citizen is like carrying an invisible knapsack full of benefits with me wherever I go. We live every day with labels and categories, some of which we have chosen for ourselves; others have been imposed. At root, however, the categories are nothing more than arbitrary constructions.

Yet, in times of danger, water needs to freeze to keep itself from getting diluted. Identity labels—like ‘Christian,’ ‘gender-queer,’ ‘male,’ ‘faggot,’ ‘straight’—can become like protective blankets. Identity is sometimes fluid, sometimes solid, sometimes in response to outside stimuli. Ultimately, however, it must be self-defined and owned.

What was Jesus thinking in that surging crowd two thousand years ago? There he was, confronted with a situation where he was expected to fit into a whole bunch of social scripts, ones he never chose. He should have ignored her. He should have scolded her for being so rude as to break religious purity laws (Leviticus 15,19–30).

He should have dismissed her, ordered her away with a warning: “Get back in your place, you dirty whore.” (Women who violate social norms have always been accused of being prostitutes, invoking the historic, uncompassionate stigma against sex trade workers, as in Leviticus 19,29.)

Instead, Jesus turned all his attention towards this woman, crossing the boundaries of social stigma (and risking his own reputation) and affectionately calling her his ‘daughter.’

In Europe, as borders are supposedly eroding with the European Union, extreme nationalist parties are disturbingly on the rise and fears of foreigners are growing; there are similar trends here in North America. ‘Outsiders’ come to be seen as pollution to the body of the nation, and people become afraid, particularly when they falsely associate terrorism with race and culture. There is a perception that too much is changing too fast.

It is here that gender fits into this picture. Gender, unlike physical sex, is not biological. It is a set of social attitudes, expecta-



tions and scripts that shape our society, and is in turn shaped by society. This becomes obvious when one considers that ideas of gender vary widely across times and cultures. Western culture has two genders. The ancient Greeks had a handful of genders. Some North American indigenous traditions have even more, and still others see individuals as containing many genders within.

Gender is all about boundaries and borders. It is made visible only by what it is not, defined by what it excludes, and it lacks any real, unchanging essence.

Jesus, however, refused to deal in the logic of exclusion. He showed us a way to cross such borders, identifying with the oppressed and marginalized (Luke 6,20). These were impoverished people, but the powerful called them 'dirty whores' and 'savages.'

It is even probable that the two 'bandits' the Romans crucified with Jesus were political rebels, not ordinary criminals (Mark 15,27; Luke 2,37). Jesus took risks upon himself personally, but his interactions with women in particular were very political and subversive.

Just as this bleeding woman was forbidden by purity taboos from touching Jesus, the whole idea of the modern nation-state depends upon policing borders and preventing 'pollution' from outside. In fact, Old Testament culture directly linked sexual prohibition with the pollution of the nation (Leviticus 19,29).

While Jesus overruled such stigmatization as fiercely uncompassionate (John 8,1-11), it illustrates some of the logic behind the moral panic we witness today: racism

against immigrants, attacks on sex trade workers, and fear of terrorists in our neighbourhoods.

IN WHOSE NAME?

There is a sexual element to the history of the nation-state, particularly clear in the era of colonialism. When Britain colonized the world, for instance, it imagined the 'savages' it encountered as having gendered traits. Africans were considered ultra-masculine—sexually aggressive, well-endowed and dangerously violent. Asians were seen as ultra-feminine—passive, weak and easily conquered.

Today, racism is officially out of style. And yet most of the old stereotypes like those above are still applied in the media and in political rhetoric. We hear that all Muslim cultures oppress women and threaten democracy—therefore it is 'civilized' to forcibly remove girls' veils in French schools, as happened this year.

It was a testament to 'progress'—in 1958, French women colonizing Algeria ripped the veils off Muslim women to liberate them. (When the New York Times printed photos of the grateful 'Muslims,' they conveniently ignored the fact that those photographed were in fact French women disguised as Algerians.) Once again, the West is called in to defend the rights of women in 'other' patriarchal cultures that oppress women.

We think it is therefore 'civilized' to invade and impose Western-style 'freedoms' on the rest of the world: the 'right' to be brainwashed with advertising, to be obsessed with being dangerously skinny, to surgically alter one's beauty, make oneself into a sexual object, and to buy an endless supply of cars, clothes and cosmetics. This kind of freedom is a meaningless freedom.

Feminism is a way of looking at the world through a gender lens. Further, it provides insights into modern-day racism and imperialism, and consequently the modern nation-state and our whole economic system, with its base of exploitation of cheap (and free) women's labour.

We must remember that it is women of colour who are most exploited. They are the equivalent of the haemorrhaging woman in Jesus' time. They work in sweatshops and ghettos and brothels underneath the glamour of white Western imperial capitalist culture today, silenced within the boundaries of 'free' trade, economic regulation and sexual taboo.

Here in Canada, 'liberating' Native women from servitude to their 'savage' husbands was used as an excuse by the Victorian British to justify conquering indigenous cultures, stealing their children, and murdering them with disease and outright genocide. (In fact, the British were apparently outraged that Native women worked in the fields and did hard labour with the men, at a time when wealthy white women were pampered and protected.)

At risk of sounding crudely ideological, I cannot emphasize this point enough: to understand our world, we must understand our history. Western culture is rooted in exploitation and genocide.

It takes real courage, then, to start questioning the whole system that we live in, which has not changed as much as we imagine. This becomes more and more evident when we take the time to



actually listen to what colonized and marginalized people are saying. Indian writer Arundhati Roy rejects the Western activist ideal of being a ‘voice for the voiceless’: “There’s no such thing as the ‘voiceless,’” she said. “There are only the deliberately silenced or the preferably unheard.”

Listening is the kind of act feminism requires of us. It is the same call we hear from the Gospels, and it goes against the purity codes of our time.

DECONSTRUCTIONIST HELL

Sexuality and gender are too complex, too deep, too nuanced for a single, simple explanation. My own identity oscillates between concepts and categories, old and new. Sometimes I feel ‘male,’ sometimes not. Sometimes I feel ‘straight,’ sometimes not. Where are my own roots?

Let me start by going to the freezer and taking a single cube of ice from the tray. Holding it between my fingers, I feel the ice’s glass-hard surface is crisp, sticking slightly to my skin. Within seconds the cube begins to melt, slowly, at the edges. Soon it rapidly shrinks into a puddle and runs down my arm in a single determined stream, dripping onto the table. The water can always be refrozen, but it will eventually melt again.

Gender and sexuality are like this ice cube. The water—my core being—is always there. But when my identity seems solid, I’ve realized it’s a temporary illusion. Impermanent. Fluid. An idea that can never truly be pinned down, defined, or frozen for all time.

I Am. Not. Unchanging.

Try saying that in the mirror every morning; it sounds like deconstructionist hell. It’s one of the scariest places to venture, a place where solid categories blur in and out of focus. But this, I think, might be freedom. At least, it seems a lot like faith.

IDOLS OF IMPERIALISM: A CONFESSION

This essay began by asserting that feminism has changed who I am. My learnings in university complicated everything I’d taken for granted. I discovered that the simplistic, gender-binary categories of the XIXth century were not only outdated; they completely over-simplified the complexity of human diversity. To this day, identity is seen as some kind of universal unchanging essence found within.

This assumption—referred to as ‘essentialism’—quite simply excludes the experiences of many people. At root, the categories we take for granted are in reality historically specific, mind-made, imposed ... dare I suggest, even arbitrary, coincidental products of our history and changing values?

Our civilization has created false gods of progress, materialism and domination—idols of imperialism. We in the ‘civilized’ West have placed ourselves at the top of the social and ecological food chain, and we think we have subdued the world with our minds.

But as people of faith, we answer to a different call. Science and money are not evil, but we have constructed a new religion out of them, offering them sacrifices (such as warfare’s ‘collateral damage’), policing their moral purity, and destroying those who live differently—those who live by the land, who depend upon the Earth, who seek refuge in foreign lands, who are so audacious as to try to teach youngsters how to hunt and survive.

Through our worship of modernity, we are worshipping “gods that are not gods at all” (Jeremiah 5,7). These false

gods have demanded sacrifice after sacrifice. But God commands us: “You shall have no other gods to rival me” (Exodus 20,3).

I have come to feel okay with allowing my own identity to melt into different shapes, like an ice cube that will never be forever frozen. I can still feel the sensation of icy water coursing down my arm as who I am melts and flows with the warmth. And I still fight like hell in the face of hatred and discrimination, against anyone.

The ideas of gender and human rights have been corrupted by the powers that be—the Guardians of the Religion of Modern Civilization. Its god is Progress, and it is a fundamentalist religion because it cannot see outside of its own logic. Its fruit is seen in the sheer hypocrisy of George Bush and Tony Blair justifying the occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan in the name of human rights, women’s rights and ‘enduring freedom.’

Why do people believe this rhetoric, this ‘noise’ and ‘clanging’ of words without love (1Corinthians 13,1)? I have struggled with this question and am convinced that we live not in democracies but within a global Empire. In their book *Multitude*, Antonio NEGRI and Michael HARDT argue that today’s empire relies not on territory but on a global logic of rule (what I have called ‘false gods’) cloaked in the language of universal human rights and freedom.

Feminist analysis has not only informed my view of gender. Once I started asking the questions that feminism raised, I saw the world in a new way. I realized that even the beacons of enlightenment we call ‘liberal democracy,’ ‘the free market’ and ‘international development’ are still within the Empire’s logic.

NEGRI and HARDT warn us not to confuse Empire with historical colonialism, nor to blame solely the United States or George Bush. We haven’t truly listened, and so even well-meaning social justice and church campaigns can perpetuate exactly what we oppose. I am not suggesting that democracy must be abandoned, but that it is time we reclaim it through collective action and solidarity— informed by critical, feminist approaches.

Our calling, as followers of Jesus’ way, is to the path of love. As Richard A. HORSLEY writes in his book *Jesus and Empire*, the way of Jesus will necessarily call us into rebellion against Empire. Christianity was originally a movement against the Empire of its day, and so it has much to teach us.

Amidst the clamour of today’s crowds, can we even hear those voices persistently sneaking up behind us, touching our cloak? Or do we turn and follow our presidents blindly, ignoring the pleas of the multitude and pretending there is peace (Jeremiah 6,14)?

Do we have the courage to follow in the ‘way of love’ (1Corinthians 14,1), and in the footsteps of our Lord? “Courage, my daughter, your faith has saved you. Go in peace.”

Suggested Reading

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