

OLOC Confronting Sexism Series June 20, 2023 Notes

An Anatomy of Institutions and their Impact on Girls and Women: Religious Institutions

Sally Tatnall: I am going to be talking about the institutions of religion. I know that I think there is something about being a human being where we want to be connected to something larger than ourselves. But this is about how it has, how that sense of being has evolved the concept of religion desires. The concept of religion requires a desire to be saved, to be saved from fear, to be saved from pain, to be saved from retribution, to be saved from poverty, and to be saved from loneliness. Religion is also set up to affirm your individual perfection. For the women, religion also offers community. Who will do this saving? In the beginning tribes looked to nature of some sort to keep them safe. The Christian Bible says it is God you can look to for saving, after all, he made us. The Hebrew Torah says Jehovah will do the job. All religions have a top entity that will do what needs to be done to keep us from all that we fear.

So, it follows, what do we need to do so this will happen? Hierarchy says you don't get something for nothing. There is homage to pay. Each religion has put together a sophisticated system of beliefs you must hold. There are more learned (mostly men) beings who will help with this because obviously under hierarchy the common people won't understand the complexities. The learned people will break it down into simpler behaviors so we can obey. Obedience is the ticket to being saved. Each religion has put together a sophisticated system of beliefs you must hold. Great schools are built for the purpose of learning the complexities. People go to learn how to teach others how to obey. Much money must be contributed so this learning can be done. Money must be given so the learned ones will prosper. This is important because under hierarchy, the religion must look prosperous. One religion must be better than other religions because hierarchy demands this. Great religious wars have been fought to confirm hierarchy.

"Survival of the fittest" is the name of the game. I want us to consider "survival of the species" as the defining thought for all behavior. As a Christian I look at the ideas I have been taught that seem to support the individual idea as well as male hierarchy. I am going to speak mostly from a Christian perspective, but I will draw parallels where I can.

For Christianity, Adam and Eve were in the garden of perfection. Along came the snake who tempted Eve to eat from the tree she had been told was forbidden. After she had eaten from this tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, Adam and Eve were banished from this perfection. Religions that I am familiar with all have one thing in common. It is the male of the species that has defined what perfection is. So, in the Christian system it makes sense to blame Eve. This fear of the female is underwritten in all of Christianity. The second part of the knowing is the making of Eve from the rib of Adam. This seems to signify that without male there would be no female. Thus, Adam's superiority is set. Superiority set this perspective which advances the hierarchy of male being and with regard to the role of women and some other beliefs. The woman took Moses from the bullrushes and made sure he was raised. A goddess who I do not remember her name, sprang from the head of Zeus. The woman is really sort of an ancillary to the main subject of the religion.

I want to now look at the Christian myth in another way. When survival of the species is the basic structure of living, it is important to know the difference between good and evil. It is important not to be taken in by something you are told is good but in fact is life threatening. A snake has long been a symbol of the female witch, the wise woman, the one who knows, heals, surely it is also believable and logical that this female snake would want Eve not to be taken in by this perfect looking environment

where she is confined. She would want this mother of creation to be able to discern the truth of growing and surviving, which for most the survival of the species. However, this is not the way of the religion, the institution of Christianity is a myth since men have been the writers of history and religion, it is easy for them to think the first story of Adam and Eve is true. But women have responsibility to look at the world considering their community's survival. Women have been the backbone of every church, and I think that the decline in church attendance has mainly been because women have failed to see what is in their heart in the institutions of male religion. Interesting to me to me that they even have the Adam and Eve story at all which only functions to blame women which really sets me thinking. How is it that these religions are set up to somehow find women at fault or to blame, or to just be a side effect of whatever the great man is doing? Again, I think there's something about being human that wants to be connected to someone more than just ourselves, and women must lead that expression.

Rena Grasso: Setting the framework for discussion by reminding us that we first need to look, we need to imagine about the many centuries prior to secularism because we live in a very secular society. We do not live in a theocratic state, and the combination of that, and beginning in the nineteenth century, the rise of modern science has really diminished the role of religion and in the general belief in religion. However, we have to remember as we discuss this topic, the incredible power that religion had over the lives of women. A religion that told them that by nature their subordinate position in the world was decreed by God, and so that any attempt on the part of women to show that they might be powerful or independent was met with the extreme suppression from the priesthood. And while I refer only to the past, I do not think I need to remind us that religion still exists. We think about the Taliban exercises an incredible repressive role over women. All we think of is Christian fundamentalism right here in our own country. We still see this as a power. The second thing that I want to remind us of is that this session is one of a series, and in that series, we have stressed the systematic nature of sexism, and we have defined that with a metaphor that is the metaphor of a web of threads that are woven together, and each of those threads reinforces and crisscrosses one another. What a connection between ideology and institutions! So, in this case the ideology is the Bible, that is the core of Western patriarchal religions, its ideology. Its institutions are the churches, the synagogues, and the mosques and the teachers that are housed in those institutions. I think religion is a perfect institution in which to see the interconnection between ideas, ideology, the Bible, and our whole society, for the teachings have gone on for centuries, and saying this without exaggeration. The teachings would fill multiple volumes of books, and these teachings have been incredibly derogatory and debasing of women. From St. Augustine, who wrote that every woman should be overwhelmed with shame at the thought that she is a woman continued right up to 1971, when Episcopalian Bishop Meyer declared that a priest is a god symbol in both the New and the Old Testament. God is represented with masculine imagery. Christ is the source of priesthood. The sexuality of God in Christ is no accident, nor is their masculinity. It is basic, given, unchallengeable. This is not just a hierarchy. This is a very specific male hierarchy, and that is what second wave feminism did for our consciousness, because what second way feminism did was that it gave patriarchal religion a history and then giving that history it showed that patriarchal religion is not a divine thing, it is a man-made ideology, with its man-made institutions, and that very specifically it is so man-made because patriarchal religion grew very specifically out of war societies. Patriarchy, and one of the thrusts was to destroy the female centered spiritualities that had reigned in human history for more than 25,000 years. Woman centered spirituality is a far older phenomena and shaper of human beings than the relatively recent patriarchal religions of the last 5,000 years.

We will start with the question: What influence do you think the image of man, of God, of divinity, as a god has had upon you and upon us as women?

Comments/Statements:

- You know, this topic is one that I personally have thought a lot of, and I thought about it in many different ways, because I was raised in a mainline Protestant church. The United Methodist Church outside Cleveland Ohio and was very active. However, there was a time when I had to really question that involvement with my own sense of myself as a feminist. And even though I was involved with women who were in ministry and considered themselves feminist, there was a way in which we convinced ourselves in essence to drink the Kool-Aid and that we made up stories. We made up stories about why we did not have to see God as male, and that we could say, well, this is because men wrote the Bible, and this is the interpretation, and yadda, yadda, but in fact, over the years I have begun to see that we really were just fooling ourselves. And now, more recently in my life, I think about the ways in which I have to catch myself and ask the question why you are reacting this way. Are you believing this because you have discerned it to be true, or are you believing this way because the foundation of the belief is all of that I drank for all those years. Because I would say that I now am skeptical of often my own reactions to things, because I am not a hundred percent sure that I am not believing them because I have been taught so clearly. And I would argue, it is not even just the discipline of the United Methodist Church that I was taught and went on to believe. This has become the foundation for all our institutions in this country, which is, there is a God, and that God is male and all of these things that follow, because honestly, now it seems rather obvious to me the primary role these patriarchal religions is in fact, to be able to subjugate women in particular, in order to perpetuate their own power. One nation under God.
- My experience is very different. I did not grow up Christian. I grew up Jewish but not in a religious family, in a very cultural family, and not most of what you are saying really has had very little meaning for me in in my life. I have never been that way. But I am an extremely cultural militant Jew, which is very different than practicing the dogma of a religion, and I am grateful to my parents, having raised me like that. But one of the things I did experience, and this is much more contemporary practice than in the Bible, or anything like that, when there is a service in a synagogue, or when a person passes away and there is going to be a memorial service, they need to have what is called a minyan. Now a minyan is at least 10 men to be present to start this service, and in my lifetime, when family members of mine passed away, and I went to the Memorial, there was 6 women there, 4 men. They couldn't do it until they had 6 more men, so that was an early lesson in terms of interpretation of really religious practice, and for me, personally, I don't necessarily feel in this stage of my life that I have to be part of a minyan and my guess is that is in the more conservative ones, we are reform to reconstructionist practices. I grew up in an orthodox household, and that's how it was.
- I was raised Catholic, and the thing is, when I came out as a lesbian I stopped going to church. I stopped everything because I guess I just realized then how misogynist it is. The Catholic Church was totally made up; it is totally written by males, everything about the male. There is no God, it was totally made up; it is a made-up religion, right? Men, and all their rules are to hold women down. All the rules are hard and I believed it all until I came out as a lesbian. Then I am like, wait a minute this is bullshit. I got to be a feminist, a lesbian feminist. That is my religion, and that is how I felt. I just felt like everything that was taught to me was not true. It is just a lie, a big lie.
- I grew up Catholic, and I just want to share that I had a similar experience when I was a child. I loved all that stuff. I loved the ritual, I loved the ceremony of it, and when I came out and as I

became an adult, I realized there was really no place for me. Although the first gay people I knew were not happy people, so I did not really feel like there was a place for me there either. Someone was saying earlier about the churches, primarily to subjugate women, at least in my experience and my knowledge of history, it is also just power in general. That is why the priests are not married because they do not want to have to deal with inheritance and property; they to give all that to the church when they join. So, I think power is it and not just the subjugation of women, which is an expression of power, but power is the primary focus.

- I was also raised Roman Catholic, and one of the things now being older is that I realize is that I went to a parochial school from first to eighth grade and in the parochial schools that I went to or in our diocese, we were all taught by nuns. After seventh and eighth grade we were taught by laypeople and the nuns had to make sure that we understood the catechism, and that we lived by the catechism. As you get older in life, I have found out there are a lot of things in catechism which are not really true, and in a way, it has cost me to lose my religion and because there are several other things that have happened over my lifetime. But I believe in God, and I believe in Jesus Christ, but I believe that he taught us to live by the 10 commandments. I really do not trust the Bible either.
- I have a lot of things to say. I met an out a lesbian activist named Marsie Silvestro in 1987, who was once a nun and is internationally known whom. She is a composer, a visual artist, an activist, an author, and has a couple of books. One of her poems is called *Feast of Eve on Her First Day* and you can hear her Catholicism. Eve on her first day. A garden's fullness offers bright red, delicious apples, ruby colored hanging manna, choice pickings for your searching soul. Hungry woman on the eve of your first day you chose to feed yourself first and not cook for Adam. Good for you.
- I was raised Presbyterian that is, my parents sent me to the Presbyterian Church. They did not necessarily attend. What I found was the thing that kept me in the church was the music, and it was all women that were involved. Hello! I knew early on where I belonged. No one else wanted to talk about it, no one else wanted to be part of it, but I knew. Mrs. Heller was our marvelous organist, a great choir director that I loved being around, she was just such a sweet lady. That was the thing I remember about religion. When it came to sitting through Sunday School, and all that stuff, it was like, I wondered how much longer I have to live through this. I attended the group meetings because then I got to go to the choir, and if I was in the choir I got to be with a bunch of other females with beautiful voices, who could do beautiful things. Why not? And it became a segment of my life merely for music. I could have cared less about anything else. I knew that the men were going to of course, be in charge, but also, as I grew older, the minister's wife, Mary Knowlton, is the one who recommended me to the college I went to. I would never have even thought of going if it had not been for her, and she put in the recommendation that got me in, because certainly my grades and all the things I did would not have done a whole heck of a lot there. So, it is like the church to me, was where I got to know and be around and enjoy women without having to necessarily say I am a lesbian. I could just do my thing, and thoroughly enjoy being a lesbian without saying anything out loud. Religion was sort of there and you kind of lived with it. Women have something very special, and I got to spend time with women, being with the people you most enjoy, and that you most relate to. I related well to women and music and that's where I was at.
- I was raised Catholic, and I am very grateful to my mother. My mother was Hispanic, born in Puerto Rico and her mother was Cuban; her mother died when she was 10. She was raised by her father, who was very anti-clerical. He did not like the Church because his mother had been very religious, and he just could not stand it. He did not like religion, and he would look at the priests in San Juan, and he would say to my mother and other kids, you see that priest, he has 3 children, and that was

not untrue. I was raised by a father who was devout, because his mother was a very devout Catholic. His father was a Lutheran, so the mother in that time, if you married a Catholic, you had to raise them Catholic, so my grandfather agreed to that, but he never converted. My mother did not go to church, so people might have stereotypes about Hispanics, or whatever, but my mother was not religious. She did not go to church. My father went to church, sat in the last row, and took naps during the mass, so basically, that is what I saw. They did enroll us in Catholic schools, so, educated by nuns. But I used to cry because the church, the schools, taught me that my mother would go to hell because she did not go to church. She would take me to the church at 6 am to train for my Holy Communion. The children were not allowed to eat anything before. So, what did I do? I barfed so that is my introduction to Holy Communion - I got sick to my stomach. I felt like I was a little robot, and my mind turned to mush because everything was fed to me. My mother helped me use my critical thinking and realize that. I lasted until I was 18. But after that I just really unhooked. I just felt very indoctrinated. There were good things, of course, there were nice nuns, in fact, one of my dearest friends is a Carmelite cloister nun. So essentially, I do not really feel I have a religion; I can pray when I feel I need to pray.

- I grew up Episcopalian, Southern, my mother was Southern Baptist, my father was an Episcopal minister, so my first community was church, and that went all through high school, and then I got away, to go to college and got involved with Quakers. I think the word that's most important to me in our introduction was the word above. Somehow God is out there. I got involved with a gradual, lifelong understanding of what does it mean to find what is sacred and holy inside my spirit. And so, when I came out and was involved in activism in the sixties and seventies, revolution was my religion. That was the thing that was the most important value in my life. And after I came out, I was a fighter activist, and still am. Then I got involved with Metropolitan Community Church, which directly confronted the homophobia and the sexism and the patriarchy of religion, and I really believe that anytime spiritual beliefs get connected with political power they are corrupted and are about power over, being above. And that is really true in Western colonialism and the empire building of Europeans, and how Constantine made Christianity a religion of the Roman Empire that just made everything that was the foundation of patriarchy. I really fought that tooth and nail from the edge, confronting that a lot in my life, and have continued all my life to have spirituality be a really important part of my life. After those years, I ended up actually on an Indian spiritual path where I have a woman spiritual teacher and have been doing that for 33 years. The teaching is about discovering that essence within yourself and living from that place. So, it has been a gradual unpeeling of layers of cultural indoctrination which the church is so good at, discovering what the truth is within me. And I really believe that indigenous paths and anything that is connected with Gaia, with the earth, and many of the women's religions all have that sense of going inside to find the thing that connects you with everybody else, and the whole world and natural environment, and being rooted in that. So, these days I live in the mountains of western North Carolina in retirement, and I am involved with the Quakers here and with my daily practices with the Indian path. It has been a pattern of letting go of the indoctrinated power over, understanding of religion and moving into a deeper understanding of what my internal truth is, and how it connects with people. And I am very grateful for that path, and it is a life on and beyond journey. There are all sorts of remnants of things that I still need to be aware of. But I am really grateful that my first crush was the church organist. She got me started. So many priests have really struggled with sexuality. Sometimes repressing sexuality is really about avoiding acknowledging gayness. That is my journey, and I am really grateful for this conversation. I want to connect with what you said.

- I want to connect the goddess to that, because all that we have discovered above the goddess is that the goddess is the world. The goddess is nature, the goddess is earth, and the idea of a father in the sky is very much part of what we know about patriarchy. Hierarchy and power over, that very image of God, the Father in the sky. But earth the mother is connected to these things. Sally said something about getting salvation to women, to women's centered religions, to Gaia. It is not about salvation. Salvation is not what the goddess was about, nor is it a matter of tolerating other religions. The whole intolerance, religious intolerance developed with the Judeo-Christian tradition, it is not in the religious or spiritual traditions of non-western patriarchal religion. There are many concepts that come from this religion that we think are just concepts, but like salvation and intolerance, these are historical phenomena.