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- ¹ As summarized by Ans J. van der Bent, *Vital Ecumenical Concerns: Sixteen Documentary Surveys*, Geneva, WCC, 1986, p.199.
- ² Cf. *Minutes of the 29th meeting of the WCC central committee*, August 1976, p.96.
- ³ Cf. Thomas F. Best, ed., *Beyond Unity-in-Tension: Unity, Renewal and the Community of Women and Men*, Geneva, WCC, 1988, esp. pp.162f.
- ⁴ David Gill, ed., *Gathered for Life* (official report of the WCC's Vancouver assembly), Geneva, WCC, 1983, p.255.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, p.58.

Defining Ourselves as Orthodox Women

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The topic assigned for this presentation – to survey recent developments and challenges related to the participation of women in church and society – is of course an impossible one, especially perhaps at a time when women and their role in development is a central issue in international discussions. Those who have followed the five major United Nations conferences of the 1990s – Rio de Janeiro (environment and development), Vienna (human rights), Cairo (population and development), Copenhagen (social development) and Beijing (women) – know that the most intensive discussions and disagreements during the deliberations in these international forums have centred on women, their rights and responsibilities.

To make the assignment manageable, I shall limit myself here to comparing what was revealed by two 1985 studies of the World Council of Churches with the preliminary results of the extensive programme of team visits the WCC undertook in 1994-95 at the midpoint of the Ecumenical Decade – Churches in Solidarity with Women. I will then share some of my experiences from working with women at the grassroots since my return to Egypt from Geneva in 1986.

Few signs of change

The 1985 studies were undertaken in connection with the end of the United Nations Decade for Women. One, based on a set of questions sent to the churches, was designed to assess the nature and extent of women's participation in the churches. The second, entitled "Women, Religion and Sexuality", sought to discover how various world religions define the role of women and deal with women's bodies and women's sexuality. The eight women – from Africa, the Americas, Asia, Australia-New Zealand and Europe – who took part in this study were adherents of eight different religious traditions (Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim and Christian – Orthodox, Protestant and Roman Catholic). They were the-

ologians, ordained priests, social scientists and activists. Besides meeting together several times, each spent a year researching original sources to find out how the teachings of her own religious tradition approached these issues.

The mid-Decade reports I have used here covered visits to about 250 WCC member churches and some 500 women's groups. Subsequently, about 80 more churches and 100 more women's groups were visited. The visitation programme concluded with a team visit to the offices of the WCC in Geneva to reflect on the Council's own commitment to follow up the goals of the Decade.

In short, the reports of the mid-Decade visits have largely reconfirmed what was discovered in the 1985 survey by the WCC women's desk: that in all the member churches of the WCC – Western and Eastern, Protestant and Orthodox – women constitute more than half the congregations or parishes, but their number decreases as we move up the church structure, almost disappearing at the top of the hierarchy. Although many Orthodox churches were still to be visited at the time of this report, my own experience leaves me little doubt that few Orthodox women are present even in local church boards. Yet despite how little churches take account of the concerns of women, the reports told again and again of the deep love women have for their churches and their readiness to commit themselves to the service of the churches.

The mid-Decade reports have also confirmed what the 1985 study on "Women, Religion and Sexuality" found regarding the role of culture and its impact on religious teachings: namely, that "cultural and political contexts play a more influential role in determining the practice of the churches towards women than do theology and tradition".

The study revealed how all religions have been interpreted by men. The researchers were surprised to note that although their religions were different in nearly every other aspect, there was a great deal of similarity when it came to the definition of women, their bodies and their sexuality. All religious traditions include teachings which in theory elevate women to the highest level; in practice, women are relegated to a lower position in both church and society. The researchers could not help concluding that when it comes to teachings about women, all their religions were influenced by the patriarchal values that have always dominated relationships, particularly in religious institutions.

The mid-Decade reports on women's involvement in theological education have confirmed what was learned in 1985. Although the number of women enrolling in theological schools is steadily increasing, the percentage of women in faculty and administrative positions remains extremely low. Should we not agree then with the team report that now

that women are becoming more *visible* in theological institutes, they should also become more *audible*? The libraries of too few theological schools include feminist literature; and the curricula of too few include courses on theology from women's or feminist perspectives. As far as Orthodox theological schools are concerned, in Egypt I know of a few women theology teachers, but teaching feminist literature or teaching theology from a feminist perspective would be anathema.

We may agree with the report of the visits that "there is a significant increase in awareness of women's concerns". But there is also a backlash, exacerbated by increasing religious fundamentalism. The first victims of the tendency to interpret scripture literally are women. They are the first to be told to take a secondary position and to confine their role to that of wife and mother. We need to read scriptures in the context of the present, being aware of the difference between the cultural and historical setting of the past and the present. Women in particular have an active role to play in re-reading scripture according to our new awareness of ourselves and our role in society.

Where are Orthodox women in all this change? How do others define us and how do we define ourselves? Where do we take our struggles for gender equality and justice for women?

It is recognized that most of the women in our Orthodox churches are very faithful and loyal to the church and are ready to serve it at all times, in humility and obedience. Anca-Lucia Manolachi, a Romanian Orthodox theologian, has written, "the Orthodox woman is by far more Orthodox than men, more submissive, more full of mercy towards the poor and more faithful to the message transmitted by the clergy".¹ Building on this statement, Elisabeth Behr-Sigel, an Orthodox professor in Paris, writes:

Women feel at ease in the warm liturgical atmosphere of the parish; they are in a comfortable cocoon and ask no questions as if the social life outside had no connection with the rituals of the liturgy. It is out of laziness rather than Christian humility on their part that women do not bother to ask themselves whether their Christian responsibility does not require them too to play a more active part in the spiritual guidance of the community.²

Are these descriptions of our situation as Orthodox women overstated? How do we truly define ourselves? Do we not tend to adhere to a theology of sacrifice and suffering, and if we are ever victimized by our husbands or menfolk, we are admonished to be patient and pray. Poor women in particular are often asked to be patient, to pray, to bear their cross until they get their reward in heaven. Is this not one expression of our Orthodox spirituality?

Many of us, though deeply rooted in our Orthodox faith and identifying profoundly with it, are frustrated by this emphasis on obedience and submission. We cannot help reacting, perhaps with anger, to the many forms of inequality and abuse on the basis of gender. The team visit reports have confirmed what we see and hear around us of “the unspeakable violence that is being perpetuated daily”.

Fortunately, some women have now decided to break the “culture of silence”. Women around the world, inside and outside the churches, are learning to share their suffering and to encourage one another to overcome apathy and obedient submission to teachings that alienate and subordinate us. We are learning to say No to whatever is denigrating and unjust, especially to helpless women who have been economically and educationally deprived.

Regarding the theology of sacrifice and suffering, the team report expresses well what many of us feel:

A theology of sacrifice and suffering when applied only to women, imposed on women and taught in order to keep them subjugated, is harmful to women and dangerous for the theology of the church. It hinders women’s liberation and in turn men’s liberation, and it distorts the purposeful will of God.

When the churches do not support women in their struggle against patriarchal values, some of these women, although remaining faithful to the church as their spiritual home, will take their struggles outside church structures. They join other men and women in civil society who believe in their mutual liberation from the shackles of patriarchy that has ruled the world and our religious life for far too long. We need to help free our gospel teaching from the cultural influences that have shrouded its true message as “one gospel that frees us all, men and women, and makes us precious and equal in the sight of God”.³

Pain and hope at the grassroots

My present ministry is serving with women at the grassroots level, listening to their stories of pain. Working together with them for our mutual empowerment has become a very rewarding task. Yet I do not perform it under the aegis of my church. The Coptic Orthodox Church remains my source of spiritual nurture, but it is not my place of involvement in society. I do this work as a volunteer in a local non-governmental organization, in which we are able to relate to women of other denominations and other faiths.

The work in which I am involved is among the most downtrodden Egyptians in Cairo – the household garbage collectors known as the *Zabaleen*. For more than fifty years, these people, who now number around

25,000 in several settlements around Cairo, have earned a meagre living by collecting and sorting the refuse of the rich. They have toiled in silence, accepting life in hazardous conditions, living among the animals they breed on the remains of the food they collect. And they give fresh value to the growing amounts of refuse from a consumer society by carefully sorting it for recycling and returning the raw materials to the industrial stream.

The women are the worst victims of the difficult environmental and social conditions of this area. For in addition to the burden of an unhealthy environment, unhealthy work, neglect, illiteracy and poverty, they bear the full burden of harmful traditional practices derived from the patriarchal values that victimize women and men alike.

Let me relate some small vignettes from a typical life story of a girl growing up in Mokkattam, one of the settlements of garbage collectors. A mother gives birth to a girl child. Her neighbour, who has just had a boy, is celebrated by the family, and the neighbours offer her all kinds of food. The mother of the girl is left to herself to lament her fate and accept the blame for it.

On the tenth day, the *daya* or traditional birth attendant comes to circumcise the girl, using a razor blade to remove her external genitalia partially or completely, so that she may grow up sexually subdued and thus rendered acceptable for marriage some day.

When the girl is seven or eight years old, she cannot go to school, because the family is poor and preference is given to her brother, the future bread-winner. Moreover, she has to help her mother with the many household chores, particularly in caring for her younger brothers and sisters, who keep coming at a rate of one a year.

By the age of 14 – two years below the legal age of marriage in Egypt – she must marry. On the wedding night, she has to undergo a virginity test, which consists of the breaking of the hymen, either by the *daya* or by the bridegroom himself. The blood is then publicly displayed to the wedding guests.

From the first month of marriage, the girl is expected to become pregnant, and is blamed for every month of delay. And woe to her if she gives birth to a girl.

The young wife lives in constant fear of being forsaken by her husband or losing him due to premature death before her sons are old enough to care for her. She has never been given any education or skills which would enable her to work outside the home. She lives in an extended family setting, under the rule of her mother-in-law who, having herself been oppressed as a female, now perpetuates the oppression on this newcomer to the household. Any act of disobedience or protest

on the girl's part earns her a violent beating from her husband or his father. If she has the courage to complain to the priest, she will be told that it is her duty to be obedient to her husband and his family.

While the misery of these women appears shocking to us, it is simply an extreme form of the patriarchy that is prevalent in our societies and affects us all. It appears in other, more subtle ways in the means by which women are marginalized and excluded from decision-making in the church and society.

Yet despite the violence manifested against the young girls of Mekkattam and the painful lives that await them, they are full of hope and faith. Seeing their enjoyment of the few gifts of life and their enthusiastic response to new opportunities has been a most rewarding experience to those of us who are privileged to work with them. Both we and they learn to define ourselves better and are empowered to remove what Mercy Oduyoye has called the "stone of fear of human sexuality, the stone of men's power over women and the stone of violence against women".

For how long will we allow the church and society to socialize boys for domination and girls for subjugation? Should we not – for the sake of every poor and oppressed woman – work together to challenge our churches to break the shackles of patriarchy and to help raise the prophetic voice of the gospel of justice and liberation? Should we not as women and men liberated by Christ work in partnership, each according to her or his God-given gifts, to free ourselves, our churches and our societies from the gender prejudices that are so rampant in our world?

NOTES

¹ Anca-Lucia Manolachi, in Jeanne Becher, ed., *Women, Religion and Sexuality*. Geneva, WCC Publications, 1986, p.176.

² Elisabeth Behr-Sigel, in *ibid.*, p.187.

³ S. Wesley Ariarajah, *Did I Betray the Gospel?*, Geneva, WCC, 1998, p.47.

Women Deacons

A Brief Review of Ancient Evidence

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Biblical evidence

The earliest references to women deacons are found in the writings of St Paul. As with all the ancient orders of ministry, however, it is difficult to trace in a clear and comprehensive manner the historical development of the order of the woman deacon or "deaconess", especially during the first four centuries of the church.¹ The limited number of documents which mention this order are not comprehensive. Moreover, it is evident that in the early church practices regarding all orders of ministry differed from place to place and from one historical period to another.

We do know that by and large the order of the women deacons flourished in the Christian East until the Middle Ages. In Western Christianity, on the other hand, this order was generally discouraged (and so is even more difficult to trace). Evidence suggests that various aspects of the ministry performed by the ordained deaconess in the Christian East were taken up in the Christian West by other women, especially by widows and later by nuns. Nevertheless, there are noteworthy examples of this order surviving in some form in parts of Western Europe well into the Middle Ages. However, since references to the deaconess are largely absent from the Western fathers, historians have often identified this ministry as an "Eastern usage" which was accepted in certain parts of the church in Western Europe. Clearly there was no practice or understanding of the responsibilities, position and qualifications of women deacons which was universal throughout the early church.²

We do know that the order is traced to the apostolic period especially by the Eastern fathers. The New Testament provides us with some limited references to the ministry of women deacons. One is in the first letter to Timothy:

Deacons likewise must be serious, not double-tongued, not indulging in much wine, not greedy for money; they must hold fast to the mystery of the