

## The gender of the crucified

By W. Eggen

Biblical theology, presenting the notion of 'Servant of JHWH' as the spiritual basis of the Gospel narratives, underlines the age-old Jewish view that the divine election is a calling and a liability, rather than a privilege. Election, the term that marks the divine sonship as a messianic ministry, is perceived as a stern and excruciating task.<sup>i</sup> The cross is the inevitable mark of election, the precondition of religious nobility, not so much because of some divine plan, but because of the harsh human conditions in which the Kingdom is to be established. Indeed, South Africa's liberation theologian Takatso Mofokeng feels justified to claim that the cross-bearers, in union with the Crucified, are the true 'nation of priests'.<sup>ii</sup>

Still, in view of this biblical tradition, we cannot but be astounded to find advocates of male superiority basing their privileges on religious arguments about divine election. Which privileges are they whetting their masculine weaponry for, when they bluntly link sexual to religious symbols? Gmunden (Austria) thus witnessed religious violence of the worst kind, when protesters painted phallus symbols all over the promotion posters of the European Women Synod (July 1996), pushing male obscenity to an appalling and baffling extreme. The profoundly humiliating and inane aspect of this obscenity, within religious scope, must be clear, if we understand that the redemption and liberation Jesus effected by dying on the Cross, intended to reverse Adam's trespass, and that this fault was not so much the hubris of the 'old man' disobeying some incomprehensible divine order, but rather his abuse of the 'knowledge of good and evil' for discriminatory judgements of the other, notably the woman, Eve. We should examine what it means for our understanding of the gender divide if we believe that Jesus' death did not expiate some sin of disobedience, but rather man's abuse of God's right of judgment, based on the alleged knowledge of transcendent laws.<sup>iii</sup>

Evidently, this does not concern just the individuals' moral standing, but more specifically the mediating role people have in each other's relationship to the divine. For, religion is not to do with individuals, but rather with the rapport which a social group - as a structured unit - has to its transcendent dimension. In this socially structured rapport with the divine, some form of ministry is indispensable. Indeed, the Gmunden obscenity cannot fail to recall, in an outrageous manner, the male position in christian ministry, as it intends to mark the age-old male privilege of acting priestly '*in persona Christi*'. This gesture urges us to consider the anthropological aspect of the symbols involved. As for me, I wish to examine this issue with a reference to the intriguing article by the distinguished anthropologist Mary Douglas, titled *The Gender of the Beloved*, in which she links a most urgent plea for new forms of feminine ministry to a warning against simple and rash changes in the symbolism of the all-male priesthood.<sup>iv</sup> This issue recalls both of the universality of the gender divide, favouring the social power of men, and its religious justifications.

The questions are complex and numerous. Why Douglas' caution? Are feminist authors justified in portraying the discrimination of women as the archetype of all sin? How do women themselves

get involved in sin and how is the crucifixion to be perceived as an attack on the root of all sinfulness? Can anthropological studies elucidate the origin of the universal gender divide, and its religious justification? And what should it mean for ministry in the community of the crucified as it chooses to get engaged in the fight against the 'original sin'? I wish to help this complex debate advance slightly by studying some of these points with the help of the Girard - Scubla hypothesis on the role of religion as the control of mimetic violence, and with a reference to two Talmudic studies by Levinas, on the roles of Eve and of Rebekah. The latter I wish to relate to the famous mission statement of Jesus in Jo 4, thereby underlining, if needs be, the enormous significance of our theme for mission studies.

The suggestion that Christianity may have a mission to fulfil, in respect of this gender divide favouring male privileges, could readily be jeered. In fact, as we are about to reflect on this divide from a theological and anthropological perspective, any attempt to relate the Cross to a healing of the gender rift seems to be bitterly compromised by the controversial tradition of an all-male priesthood, and by the alleged Judeo-Christian prejudice against the women's cause. Yet, we have become aware, both of the complexity and universality of this issue, and of the interconnection of the way in which many traditions jointly constitute our frame of mind. It may be advisable, therefore, to throw a brief glance at the way in which the Greek classical mind has taught us to treat these symbols with circumspect awe. A succinct excursion into the Homeric scenery may help of look at the second, non-biblical wellspring of western traditions, and its often praised, but controversial readiness to honour women in a role of priestess or an other liturgical officiant.

#### Victimising the weeping maiden

Any modern student of the Greek classics may be forgiven for sharing the Sophists' disdain of the Homeric Olympus, with its myriads of deities - male and female - flouting all norms of decency and human concern. As an adolescent, I remember having been shocked by the Iliad's verbosity about a disgusting war, caused by the rivalry between three goddesses, Hera, Athena and Aphrodite, as each of them insisted on her right to the apple of contention which Eris, the goddess of strife had thrown into their midst, as the price of the most beautiful. Being a young man, I could not but be appalled by the awful war carnage that followed this ludicrously obscene quarrel between three divine females. When it was explained to me that this is what the male supremacy does to women, reducing them to envious and childish rivals who clamber for the males' attention, this did little to lessen my apprehension. Like many - if not most - children, I had in fact been hurt more deeply by feminine forms of violence than by that of men. Even though it might be fair to argue that this is mainly, because children do not expect this violence from women, it still seems appropriate to remind ourselves at the beginning of this study that violence, injustice and their psychic conditions are not the prerogative of any of the two genders.<sup>v</sup>

The study of the Iliad - with its warriors' exploits, similar to other great epics, like the Indian Mahabaratha - made me aware

of the complexity of human emotions, inclinations and actions. One verse of that famous poem, however, stuck in my memory more vividly than the rest, even in its Greek version: "why, o Patroklos, do you weep like a maiden?" This verse from the dramatic opening of book 16, kept recurring to me without any apparent reason, even though I had been appalled by that scornful rebuke of Patroklos, who had come in tears, to plead with the great hero Achilles, to let off his bitter quarrel with Agamemnon (once again, over a woman!)

It is Patroklos' death that will bring a solution to the entire tragedy. In mythical terms, he is sacrificed to reconcile the two heroes, Achilles and Agamemnon, and thereby to ensure the final victory.<sup>vi</sup> His death, as Achilles' substitute, will make the latter rejoin the Argive war effort, and thus cause the war chances to turn. As for us, though, we focus on this Patroklos' identification - as a victim - to a maiden, which illustrates the complexity of gender relations. Was this tragic victim a young man or rather a girl? Was he/she killed by the jealous goddesses or rather blood-thirsty warriors? The gender of both the culprit and the victim seems irrelevant; and yet it clearly is at heart of the issue, even though neither of the genders can be called the innocent victim. Things are far more complex than this. Patroklos and Iphigeneia become equals, as victims, while men and women appear to be equal causes of victimisation. But are they really? Let us not mystify things. When Patroklos is rebuked as a weeping girl, the comparison is telling. For he is thereby depicted as a despicable, just target of sacrificial persecution, as he becomes utterly ambiguous. Tears kill him in advance by emasculating him in 'effemination'. His weeping like a girl, however comprehensible and lofty it may seem as a sign of distress over occurred losses, becomes an abominable breach of categories.<sup>vii</sup>

The perception of the female gender in the Greek tradition can hardly be said to be less 'sexist' than in most others. In his study of the anthropological roots of universal trends towards religious subordination of women, Lucien Scubla actually takes the Greek classificatory systems as his starting point. The left, the dark, uneven and evil sides of the divide prove almost invariably to be associated with the feminine. If we shall use his analysis to examine our theme, it must be noted from the start, however, that he does not seem to be aware of the more subdued forms of precisely the opposite classificatory logic that makes for the balance. I have been made aware of this by the Banda of the Central African Republic and Douglas' analysis obviously presupposes this also.<sup>viii</sup>

#### Priestess and victim

Let us first return to Mary Douglas' argumentation. She holds that the male priesthood in the catholic and orthodox traditions has a deeper biblical significance than both the feminist critics and the clerical proponents seem to realise. The male priest is not just an image of the man Jesus or his apostles, or for that matter, of the divine Father, but rather the equivalent of the spouse, in the biblical imagery of the nuptial relation between the community and its saviour. It is the union of love between God and his people, and between Christ and his Church, which is liturgically enacted in the ceremonies, and in which

the priest has a symbolic position to hold. It should, so she argues, be out of the question to abandon this inspiring imagery for some legalistic reason, as there is ample room to express the equal partnership between men and women in the church's organisation by alternative means. On its own, this superficial summary of her argument should already suffice to make us aware of some religious aspects of the gender issue that tend to be ignored. Yet, by referring to the nuptial union as a religious imagery, she also makes us aware of a complex combination of mutuality and tension, of equality and hierarchy, which constitutes a laborious field of research. In fact, she herself points out that the imagery may be inverted, when it comes to the relation between God and the individual believer. They are each other's beloved, so that the gender connotation may indeed be inverted. Consequently, we must conclude that gender actually stands for complementarity.<sup>ix</sup>

We recall that the Jewish prayer welcoming the Sabbath uses a strong feminine imagery; and if a gender connotation should be attached to the emotionally charged prayers and psalms in the Bible, and also in other religious texts worldwide, the longing of a man for his beloved would certainly equal the inverse. But we should note the logic involved. Indeed, when God is invoked as the master, protector or judge, the beseecher will feature as the bride; but when God is seen as the source of consolation and tenderness, the imagery is inverted. In other words, there is a fixed double imagery, which is extended from the human to the divine.<sup>x</sup>

While appreciating Douglas' emphasis both on the need to honour an age-old symbolism and on the need to recognise the pervasive ambivalence of the gender divide, we still have to get insight into this apparently universal feature of women being supposed to show subservience in religious and social matters. Although matriarchy as a concept has become popular in feminist circles, hardly any anthropologists doubts the constant fact that the collective representations see men as in control of the social order and women as playing more or less subservient roles in the men's system.<sup>xi</sup> Consequently, much more attention should be paid to the reasons underneath this basic imbalance and to the social injustices that ensue from it, which feminists are ever so right to challenge. If the redeeming act of Christ is presented in nuptial imagery, it must be clear that the link implied in this imagery is not without carrying an alternative charge. The basic antagonism between the genders, therefore, as encountered in the various cultural and religious traditions, needs a close analysis.

#### Equity and its break down

Before looking at Scubla's interpretation of the ubiquitously raging gender conflicts and of the universal use of religious symbols to justify the rights of men over women, we may first turn to the biblical version of the foundation myth. The texts of Gen 1-10 make us understand that these conflicts have a meta-historical dimension and indeed constitute the opposite of the mystical union symbolising the divine. The popular exegesis linking the original sin and its debilitation of humans as the image of God to sexuality, is actually not without ground, when it views the Gen 3 story about Eden as the onslaught of sexual

disorder. The man-woman unity, being the interpersonal harmony in God's image, got upset to so that the sexual disorder indeed became the epitome of disharmony and sin. In all its apparent simplicity, this story does in fact summarise the most basic, human tragedy. Without aiming at any exhaustive treatment, we shall study it briefly, with a reference to the talmudic analysis by Emmanuel Levinas and to some anthropological notions that seem to most pertinent.

Levinas has devoted one of his brilliant studies of the Talmud to the gender issue in Genesis. Jewish scholars have discussed at great length the enigmatic doubling of the letter *yod* in Gen 2:7, where it is said that God fashioned (*wayyitzer*) man. Why this double *yod*? Relating it to Ps 139:5, Levinas follows some rabbinic views that indeed portrait the original man as double-faced. But the complementarity, this refers to, is not that of two genders in one person. Levinas explains that the human, in the prelapsarian state of God's perfect image, was marked by a complete respons-ability, not keeping anything hidden in the back of his mind or seeking to denote distinction.<sup>xii</sup> Without saying so explicitly, Levinas implies that God's scrutiny in Ps 139:5 actually recalls the dramatic scene of God entering the Garden, after Adam has eaten the fruit. Adam sheds all respons-ability at that very moment and points an accusing finger at Eve, thereby breaking the primordial unity, and marking his secret thoughts about femininity.

Levinas' subtle analysis, which we cannot reproduce here, not only points up the limits of the so-called sexual liberation, but makes us understand how these texts grapple, on a mythical level, with the gender duality of beings that are equal and united, but distinct and hierarchically ordered. It is a basic equity - beyond the universal subordination of women to men - which the text wants to enjoin on the reader. This unitarian equity, as a mythical fact, is underlined by numerous devices, not only in Genesis, but also in many other traditions that have been researched by anthropologists. Because the Semitic language and tradition is part of the Afro-Asian complex - with its roots in the area between the South flanks of the Ethiopian mountains and the Chad lake, and its nadir in the cultures of the lower Nile - we may look at some anthropological data from Africa that are related to Gen 2-3.

This text, also called the second creation story, is very rich as a mythical account, and there is every reason to view the emergence of the gender divide as the core message of the Fall. In the present composition, it counterbalances the impressive statement of Gen 1:27 picturing the male-female unity as the very image of the Creator God (see also Gen 5:2 and 9:6). In fact, our story stresses this unity right from the beginning. Just after God has told Adam not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, He creates the woman, leading her to Adam, who calls her 'flesh of his flesh'. The statement that they knew no shame, despite being naked, reflects a wide-spread mythical tradition about the original unity between the sexes, which is found in many parts of Africa and is often expressed in the form of hermaphroditism.<sup>xiii</sup>

It is important to link the ritual dimension of these religious traditions to the mythical one. The original unity between the sexes - without fault or blemish, i.e. as brothers and sisters of one flesh which, in real life, is to be broken by marriage

exchanges - is alluded to in many initiation and wedding rites. Its most powerful image is to be found in the initiation rites of circumcision and excision. Many African traditions actually present the prepuce and clitoris as the very reminders of that primordial unity, which must be neutralised in order to make marriage possible. This imagery, of the prepuce as a remnant of the vaginal envelope and of the clitoris as a penis in disguise, is a powerful one. It refers to the hermaphrodite state 'before shame', before each sex, so to say, marked its own identity by 'putting on the fig leaves'. The present feminist fight against the excision, claiming that this ritual is a sign of the gender conflict, as it symbolises the male domination over the woman, is correct, but for other reasons than generally advanced.<sup>xiv</sup> For we should understand that the Gen 3 story is part of a wide mythological and ritual complex, surrounding the crucial facts of life, being the sexual procreation and the male dominated marriage exchanges, by which this is regulated culturally. The symbol of a primordial unity 'beyond shame' - which reflects the vision of Gen 1:27, calling this sexual unity the very image of God Himself - and of its rupture embodies, as it were, the basic drama, forming the core of the entire human culture. The breach of that unity, as it became symbolised by the fig leaves that cover both the identity of each gender and its grip on the other, is rightly claimed to be the essence of original sin.<sup>xv</sup> But clearly, this is mythological, in the sense that humanity is thus trying to express a basic enigma: how to be one and many, at the same time? Is (sexual) diversity an evil, or is it a gift of divine benevolence? Both philosophy and theology have wrestled with it for centuries. Paul Tillich tried to summarise the Christian theology, by saying that the paradox of plurality and unity (individualisation and participation) which exist in God in non-contradictory form, but causes earthly creatures to be estranged one from another, has been surmounted in Jesus, through the Spirit of faith, that permeated his entire life and became victorious in the final paschal event.<sup>xvi</sup> Rather than pursuing these fascinating theories, which translate what the mythical community expresses in more concrete symbols, we must now return to the latter. In them, we find people's perception of this enigma of evil, which clings so closely and painfully to the sexual life.<sup>xvii</sup>

### Disqualifying women

To understand this rather universal myth about the primordial unity and 'in-distinction' of the sexes, we must realise its role as a denunciation and explanation of the ubiquitous tussle between men and women. To elucidate the mechanism of the strife I shall now turn to Scubla's theory, which I first heard about, when studying the reasons why the priestess of the *Amedzofe*-shrine in Alakple (Ghana) was to call on a male colleague from another shrine to come and slaughter the sacrificial animals at her festival. Puzzled by the traditional argument that women can be priestesses alright, but should not kill the sacrificial animals, I consulted this enlightening article, in which Scubla applied the well-known theory of René Girard, on the sacrificial mechanism, to the gender issue in general and more particularly to its pivotal place in religion. After having noted the negative place of the female in myriads

of classifications and the frequent reference to the menstrual flow of blood as its justification, he wonders why this flow should be considered dangerous to grown-up men, while it is not to children or other women. The onset of the menses forms the key to a girl's classification, an event often equalled on the boy's part by some religious ritual, characterised by exposure to hardships in which blood, pain and death is commonly a major element. To put it bluntly, girl and boy are both marked for their social roles by events in which the flow of menstrual blood is counterbalanced by ritual flow of blood. The menses constitute the social opposite of the male's shedding of blood in a ritual war, a hunt or some sacrifice. But the question remains: why such a focus on menstrual blood, and why do such rituals sacrificial killing of an enemy, a stranger, a domestic or wild or animal present an equivalent of the menstrual blood? If this means, in final analysis, that religion appears as the male equivalent of the female power of procreation, the basic question remains why these rituals of sacrificial violence are rated higher than the physical procreation by women. By which kind of logic is the ritual blood (the religious matter handled by males) related to, and rated above menstrual blood, while in final analysis it is not, of course?<sup>xviii</sup>

The ambivalence of the mythical and religious evaluation of women in Africa is most significant, as we have noted already. The fact that women may serve as priestesses, or media, for deities (who themselves can be either male or female) is often outdone by the humiliating ways men often deal with women even within ritual settings. Women can be possessed by a deity; and this may indirectly heighten their social status. But usually this happens within settings that are basically controlled by men. On the other hand, the language itself sometimes indicates that this is a symbolic layer covering the true relationships, in which the female fertility does have the edge. In the Banda language of Central Africa, the prefix \*eyi-, meaning primarily 'mother' or 'female', is used in two very puzzling meanings: the greater and the master. When asking for the owner or master of a car, a cow, etc. you are told that so and so is its eyi. Ask which of two objects is the bigger, the better, the more useful, etc. and you will actually ask which is the eyi. This curious logic permeates the entire Banda language, including its grammar and sometimes lead to apparent contradictions. A low pitched, big drum is called female whereas the high pitched is the male - the underlying logic of this being that the low pitch feels like energising. In fact, fertile and life-giving elements are termed female, whereas the dominating but sterile ones are male. The explanation of this is generally quite blunt and straightforward (given by men as frequently as by women): the female is useful, the male is not.<sup>xix</sup>

This kind of facts easily convince us of the truth in the text Scubla quotes from Pierre Clastres: "The male subconscious understands the gender difference as an irreversible superiority of the women over the men. Slaves of death, as they are, men envy and fear women, the controllers of life. That is the basic and primordial truth which a serious analysis of certain myths and rituals bear out. The myths, by inverting the real order, tend to think the course of society as a male course..."<sup>xx</sup>

Yet things are more complicated than this. For, what we have learned so far is that, notwithstanding the dominant view of a

primordial unity, both in mythology and in rituals, and despite a subliminal conviction of female fertility actually being the superior asset for society, there is still the universal social construct of a male dominance, both in practice and ideological justification. What could possibly explain this mysterious and apparently contradiction? Scubla seems to have unearthed the clue for this most puzzling incongruity. Firstly he stresses it to be stark nonsense, to claim that men just devised a means of compensating their lack of procreating power by some mystical devices. On the contrary, applying Girard's analysis, Scubla is explicit that the male specialty of sacrificial violence is of equal import to the society, If indeed rivalry and strife are endemic all through any society - ever since Adam breached the founding unity by the primordial sin of pointing his finger at Eve - and if this violence must, and can be contained by means of religion and sacrificial rituals, allowing the society to control its violence by devolving it upon sacrificial victims and scapegoats of various sorts, then the rituals which the men control, constitute a prime service to the society, as they are a safeguard to protect the life which women give birth to. For, without this (religious) control of societal violence, the new born life would have little chance of survival.

The social-religious structure, with its numerous symbolic complexities, is administered by men, not so much to control the women, but first of all to control each other and safeguard life against societal violence. The logic of this operation can be summarized as follows: just as the shedding of blood annuls procreation in women, the male shedding of ritual blood annuls the forces of death, by restoring peace and harmony. The basic snag of this argument, however, is self-evident. Firstly, that violence and rivalry are taken for granted as a facts of life (as much in women as in men) which rituals have to control and channel; and secondly, the males are not only the specialising in the control of violence, but are also prone to turn their position into a prime source of new violence, landing society in an ever accelerating spiral, due to their need to camouflage the true reasons of this sacrificial violence.

We cannot elaborate this theory any further here. But we should note how much light it actually sheds on the notion of original sin, and on the debate about the Christian ministry. To this we must return, shortly, after having considered what it was that Christ actually came to rectify. To grasp the complexity of the quandary, however, let us realise that those in control of the rituals - let us call them: the priests - may single out others as victims (notably the virgins like Iphigeneia, or the men who are no more than weeping maidens), whereas in actual fact, it is they themselves who suffer the social isolation of being the true outcasts.<sup>xxi</sup> Does this make them priest and victim alike, in the way the Christian theology has applied it to the figure of Jesus? To some extent it may, but only to some extent.

The classifying edge

To simplify the argument, I wish now to proceed to the theory of Girard and Scubla about how Jesus remedied this spiral of camouflaged violence, not so much by offering up himself, as a weeping victim in line with Patroklos, but rather by fighting the system to the point of being killed by it. Clearly, this

interpretation of Jesus' role is crucial for our analysis. But to grasp it, we should first study in some further detail the striking ambiguity of the discriminatory logic in a number of biblical texts.

Let us look at John's gospel, and its remarkable composition. After a general introduction and presentation of Jesus as the life-giving truth of the world, it settles the dispute with the baptist community, before moving into the exposition of true message. This mission-statement is first presented - unlike the missionary program of Lk 4 - in the highly dramatic story of Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman. The author seems to take delight in noting that the disciples, on their return from town, find Jesus engaged in an exchange with this woman and shy away from asking Him any questions about it. A subtle way of marking their disapproval and indicating the essence, not only of the gender divide, but of the religious dilemma as such!

This passage is revealing, in the strongest sense of the word. The embarrassment of the disciples (Jo 4:27) is displayed just after Jesus had revealed his messianic identity to the woman. It must be noted that this is the first place in this gospel to use the famous "I am"-formula.<sup>xxii</sup> To Nicodemus (Ch.3), Jesus had used the prophetic "I tell you". But of the Son, he had spoken in the third person. After the solemn testimony by John the Baptist, however, Jesus himself chose the Samaritan woman as the one to whom He first proclaimed his identity. No wonder that the disciples were bemused. Both the religious (ethnic) and gender divides are thus flouted in what doubtlessly is seen to present the core of the messianic mission.

From the scriptural point of view and in relation to the Jewish tradition, the setting is remarkable. It recalls one of the key moments in Israel's foundation story. The task of getting God's people started - after the dramatic events of Isaac's birth and sacrifice, and the acquisition of a plot of land - culminated in the selection of a wife for Isaac, and his marriage, as the son of the covenant. Abraham's servant Eliezer chooses Rebekah at the well, following the divinely approved criteria, that the woman who welcomes him and puts down her pitcher to give him a drink, shall be the God given spouse for Isaac (Gen 24:14). The parallel with Jo 4 cannot go unnoticed.<sup>xxiii</sup> Chalier's article on the position of the feminine in the philosophy of Levinas describes the way the latter relates the core of femininity to this image of Rebekah, as the woman who welcomes the stranger and takes care of him.<sup>xxiv</sup> In other words: the woman, to embody the second face of humankind and to become the mother of the nation, should respond to the stranger, beyond the limits of ritual and ethnic divides. John thus lends a profound meaning of that event at the well, where Jesus proclaimed the new dispensation of the spirit to a woman, who repeated Rebekah's sacred gesture, and where He tells the apostles that the ground for this kingdom has been worked long before any of them would come around as preachers-harvesters.

Without further analysing the views on femineity put forward by Levinas and Chalier, we must concentrate on this enigma of the gender divide, which Jesus tackles by his most unusual conduct. Although it is not my aim to disprove the accusations against Christianity, as the alleged cause of anti-feminism, I do wish to warn against oversimplifying a very complex issue. We know that the Gen 3 story of the Fall has often been viewed as what

turned Christianity into a chief source of discrimination and misogyny. In this context, Paul in particular, has unjustly been singled out as a sexist, because of his reading of this story in 1 Tim 2:12-15, because he seems to blame Eve for the original sin (in spite of his views to the contrary in the letter to the Romans).<sup>xxv</sup>

Let us repeat that sexism, in the sense of a concentration of social, political and religious power in men is a universal phenomenon, in practical all cultural traditions, and that the ideological justification it - in myths and rituals - appears worldwide in analogous forms.<sup>xxvi</sup> Even if sociologists point out that the arrival of western economic and social structures has actually worsened the plight of women in many parts of the world, there is still no reason to idealize local traditions with regard to gender relations. Anthropology has documented an almost universal and saddening trend to classify the feminine negatively, the reasons commonly advanced being, as Scubla explains, either the menstrual blood or the seduction. So, if we are to understand the basic reasons for excluding women from Christian ministry, we should link them to a more universal trend of declassifying women and of making religious rituals an all-male affaire, which was also betrayed by the disciples' response to Jesus' meeting with the Samaritan woman. They certainly were unable to see her as the mother of the new nation and as the first missionary to go and tell her people about the messianic times.

However, to state that the basic fault besetting religious life proves to be linked to the sexual divide does not imply that either of the two genders can claim innocence. The knowledge of good and evil, depicted in Genesis as having been acquired by the eating of the forbidden fruit, has put both on the ugly path of that double gesture of marking one's difference through the fig leave of 'shame' and of simultaneously disowning one's response-ability by pointing the accusing finger at the other. We must recognise, though, that the men, while using this evil of the sacrificial logic in a similar degree as women, tend to claim the right and the obligation to keep this system going (and that they are encouraged by feminine cheers for doing so). Indeed, the evil as expressed in the story of the Fall is not just about 'disobedience' to some arbitrary divine law, but rather about the breach of a primordial unity of co-responsibility (as described by Levinas).

In their prelapsarian unity - 'before' the mythical strife and its dissecting rituals of circumcision - Eve and Adam were the image of God, knowing no shame, as they had no positions or secrets to defend. Is this to say that humankind went astray by developing its highly successful device of the distribution of social roles between people of different skills and abilities? Of course not, except to the extent that an all-pervasive role is commissioned to run through the entire system, namely the subordination of the feebler (in whatever sense) to the one in command, leading to the idea of sacrificial offerings for the system as such.

#### Redeeming the rift

What does this mean for Douglas' argument that maintaining an all-male priesthood is justifiable and advisable, because it

symbolises the Christ who, in biblical and patristic imagery, represents the mystical spouse of his bride, the church? If we do agree that this imagery is of fundamental importance, we are still to take into account two crucial aspects, which may lead to a different conclusion.

Let us first agree that Christ did not give up his life to wash his bride in his blood, at least not in the sacrificial logic which we tend to associate with this imagery. Christ did not redeem us by paying a sacrificial or legal ransom - comparable to Greek heroes Patroklos and Iphigeneia, weeping for their wasted lives. The cross is opposite in nature to such a self-sacrifice. It is a radical fight to the bitter end against the sacrificial logic sending people to their slaughter, literally or metaphorically. The letter to the Hebrews does not say that Christ definitively ratified the sacrificial system by offering Himself as supreme victim, but rather that He nullifies that system decisively. As a first conclusion, this teaches us that those desiring the priestly ministry, should be ready, not so much to sacrifice this or that, but to fight that system in all its rational, and to be crucified for it, not as a praiseworthy and selfless victim, but rather as a despised outcast.

This brings us back to the question why the symbolism, Douglas refers to, is as it is. Concretely: why should the Christ be male? Should the Saviour be male? Or could the image have been the reverse, as would follow from the observation, mentioned above, that the imagery is reversed in a number of significant cases. I would argue that it had to be so, although the nuptial imagery could be equally powerful, when we follow the current logic, allowing a 'saving wife' to be portrayed, as giving her life for the beloved husband. My argument enhanced by those who object that this imagery of the 'self-sacrificing wife' would be powerless, since this is the standard role of wives. The argument why the Saviour should be male has to do with this and is quite simple, albeit also shocking in its bluntness: because the original sin was a male affaire, redemption should come from the same side as well. What can this mean? Let me repeat, first of all, that this argument does not speak about innocent people giving their life in a sacrificial ransom. Redemption is to do with undoing the very mechanism which brought sin into the world. It is about bringing humankind back to that non-discriminatory union, Adam disrupted by using the 'knowledge of good and evil' to disown Eve.

At the well in Samaria, by getting on speaking terms with an outlawed woman, who actually shows the qualities of Rebekah, Jesus launches the new and messianic humanity that honours God in the spirit. With reference to the analysis of Girard and Scubla we may formulate this by saying that Jesus eradicated the victimizing logic of the sacrificial system and that he did so as member of the male religious body. He was crucified for it, not because He himself agreed to become a sacrifice aimed at reinstalling some legal order, but He fought to nullify the logic of the 'original sin'.

If this is correct, the question rises this might imply for the gender divide and for the priesthood? Let us agree first of all that the Bible never attributed the original sin to Eve.<sup>xxvii</sup> Theologians arguing in that vain, risk to nullify the essence of the christian message, by falling in line with Adam and his 'accusing finger'. What Jesus came to do is to unravel and undo

this very mechanism of rivalry and domineering by the abuse of rules and laws, notably of religious rules. For that reason, He had to be man and enter into the very heart of that respectable male situation of being a Rabbi, a Royal descendant, member of the prophetic order, and so on, and yet to empty himself of all this (Phil 4:2), and take on the role of a servant, a slave, or a woman. At the Last Supper, He did the servile feminine thing and washed the feet of Peter and the others, saying: "Without this you can have no part with me". The whole structure of male symbolisms was involved in the purifying action, which brought Him to the cross, sentenced for his contempt of the religious (male) order.

Of course, this is not to deny that women have an equal share in the evil, and that they too hold on to their fig leaf. But the point is that in biblical and in anthropological imagery, the male is the 'mastermind' of this abuse of the social-religious structure. Consequently, the redemption, by the way of the cross, had to be done from inside, by a man. As Paul was to say: by one man (male) the forces of rivalry and sin had entered into the world, by one man this should be overcome, the gender of the crucified had to be male. But having said this, we get into a dilemma. For, once the spell is broken and the gender divide - as the base for the social-religious divide - mended, the question arises about the order in the church. Is there any reason why the ministry in the new dispensation should be male? Let us first be clear on this point that the ancient logic of a male dominated ritual has lost its value.<sup>xxviii</sup> What remains, is a task for all alike to re-enact this purifying act of the Christ personally and follow Him to the cross. The argument that women must be allowed to the priesthood, so as to share in the power and authority of men, makes nonsense of the Christian message, if indeed it is about wielding power. To desire the ministry in the church is an honourable thing, as a partaking in Christ's redemptive work on the cross, which was the opposite of seeking earthly power or status. He tells the sons of Zebedee in Mt 20: 20-23: "Can you drink the cup that I am going to drink?... Very well, you shall drink my cup, but as for seats at my right hand ...". Important to note is that Mark speaks of both the cup and the baptism of Jesus, which undoubtedly links this issue to the sacramental anamnesis of the crucifixion which Jesus has just announced (Mk 10: 35-40, see also Lk 12:50). A ministry in the community is not a matter of power, but of drinking the cup of crucifixion. In this vein, too, Paul can forbid women to strive for power within the church, because it betrays an unchristian interpretation of ministry. It falls into the trap, that caused the sinful set-up to arise, in the first place, and that Jesus' crucifixion aimed to combat. It runs the risk of perpetuating a situation of 'male-type' dominance, reminiscent of Adam's sin, in stead of working to overcome it.

The crucified beloved

The foregoing reasoning would fall through if we were to argue that the pascal event has definitively reversed the situation and overcome the adamic predicament. But it has not, and that is why Douglas' contribution remains most valuable. Obviously, to argue like the Corinthian women Paul is addressing, that the new dispensation should render the logic of the gender divide,

culminating of the 'sacrificing of maidens' obsolete, should only refer to a task to be pursued and not a reality, realised by some magical streak of history. There can be no 'sharing in the cup of the Crucified' just as a celebration of the victory over a bad dream that ever was, and that we are only asked to forget. We cannot just pretend that the prelapsarian state has been restored by the 'trick of the Crucified'. Paul is adamant that the (baptismal) maxim 'neither male nor female' is not to reduce the sexual divide to an irrelevant fact, leaving only the delights of erotic enjoyment? Levinas, too, is critical of those for whom the sexual revolution amounts to just this - even if their approach seems to be tally with the demographic development of a growing overpopulation, robbing the realm of motherhood of much of its glory and meaning.

Our celebrations, joy and gratitude should mark our faith in the victory of the cross, no doubt; and this also implies that we should joyfully welcome that there cannot be any dogmatic argument against women being ministers in the new dispensation. But to the extent that the priesthood implies acting *in persona Christi*, it must be seen to consist in doing the excruciating work of unravelling the adamic fault and restoring the ideal of the double-faced union of respons-ability which God intended. The community of believers should never discard the symbolic expression of this task of the kingdom which consists of taking part in the baptism and cup of the crucified messiah, who was not ashamed of drinking from the water a despised woman drew from the well of Jacob. The church needs someone to symbolise this paradox and - *in persona Christi* - to become part of the very mechanism of sin one fights against. If the congregation is like the bride and mother that is ready to make a home to the other - discarding all judgmental prejudices - the priests are to symbolise the crucifying *kenosis* this implies for all. Mofokeng, saying that the crossbearers are in fact the 'nation of priests', indicates that we all, women and men alike, are on our crucifying way back from Adam's sin and that all of us must adopt the double responsibility, mentioned by Levinas.

That the task to symbolise this crucifying duty is said to fall to someone in the position of both the old and the new Adam, is not a conclusion about privileges, but rather about the onus of a symbolic ministry within an wider mission. While developing a meaningful role for all its members, the christian church must take the 'not yet' of its own time seriously. As the messianic kingdom is 'not yet' realised, the (male) priesthood is in fact the excruciating symbol of our fight against what it embodies: the urge of humans to discriminate against each other. To deny this scandalously paradoxical symbol amounts to denying that we are still in need of being freed from our sinful urges; but to welcome it with a clerical glee as the ratification of 'an age-old male privilege' is to spurn the essence of its ministry and the mission it entails. So, as the candidates for this ministry increase, its mission must clearly be seen as the fight against any human urge to discriminate, judge and sacrifice; and this should imply rendering to the women the pivotal role Jesus gave them at the Samaritan well as well as at his own graveside.<sup>xxix</sup>

## Bibliography

- Bernasconi, R. 1991 *Re-Reading Levinas* London, Athlone
- Chalier, C. 1991 Ethics and the feminine. In: R. Bernasconi, Deguy, M. & Dupuy, J.P. (eds.) 1982 René Girard et le problème du mal. Paris, Grasset
- Douglas, M. 1970a (1966) *Purity and danger* Hammondsworth, Penguin
- Douglas, M. 1970 b *Natural symbols* Hammondsworth, Penguin
- Douglas, M. 1995 *The Gender of the Beloved*, In: *Heythrop Journal* 36(1995) n.4 p.397-408
- Eggen, W 1976 *Peuple d'Autrui* Brussels, Pro Mundi Vita
- Eggen, W 1997 Adam's (ir)religious finger In: *Exchange* 26 (1997)2 p.141-158
- Johnson, E. 1995 *She who is*. New York, Crossroad
- Kristeva, J. 1988 *Etrangers à nous-mêmes* Paris, Fayard
- Levinas, E. 1977 *Du Sacré au Saint Cinq nouvelles lectures talmudiques* Paris, Ed. Minuit
- McAuslan, I. & Walcot, P. (eds.) *Women in Antiquity* Oxford, OUP
- Mofokeng, T. 1983 *The Crucified among the Crossbearers. Towards a Black Christology* Kampen, Kok
- Murphy-O'Connor, J. 1996 *Paul. A critical life*. Oxford, Clarendon
- Scubla, L 1982 Contribution à la théorie du sacrifice. In: Deguy, M. & Dupuy, J.P. (eds.) 1962 p.103-167.
- Sullerot, E. (ed.) 1978 *Le fait féminin*. Paris, Fayard
- Tillich, P. 1968 *Systematic Theology* (Combined volume) Welwyn, James Nisbet
- Wallace, M. & Smith, Th. (eds.) 1994 *Curing Violence*. Sonoma California, Polebridge

## Notes

- i. In her ecofeminist criticism of the way Christians have tended to justify the domination over nature and over the female gender by a reference to divine election, Rosemary Radford Ruether, quoting Amos 3:2, reminds us of this fundamental tradition. See 1992 p.120. Her concern is also permeating the collective work by R. Gottlieb (ed) *This Sacred Earth Religion, Nature, Environment*. London, Routledge 1996.
- ii. T. Mofokeng, 1983 p.1
- iii. See W. Eggen, 1997.
- iv. M. Douglas, *The Gender of the Beloved*. In: *Heythrop Journal* 36(1995) n.4 p. 397-409.
- v. For many taking part in the nature - nurture debate, it is almost a foregone conclusion that any gender aspect is culturally induced, except for the female reproductive capacity and the male proclivity to violence. Yet, the feminist cause can not be helped by the myth of helpless maidens being threatened by male villains, who are conquered by the rare gallant prince. Whereas theology, of course, recognises that women partake of the history of

both sin and of grace (See E. Johnson 1995 p.8), there is the fundamental tragedy that the women's situation is partly due to what psychoanalysts have called the clash between the Good Mother and Bad Mother image; for, the first evil any child experiences in life is the breach of trust by the Good Mother. This primordial shock colours all later images.

- vi. See Homer *Iliad*, 16, 1-100. The double homeric comparison contained in this episode, comparing Patroklos' tears both to a black flood, a black stream running from the rock's face and to a girl running in tears after her mother, seems quite exaggerated. It is so, even if it were solely to speak of Patroklos' sorrow for the lost among his people. In fact, we understand it to be a pre-emption of crying for his own death to come, when he persuades Achilles to let him wear his armoury and is killed by Hector. G. Bailie, in his fascinating article *Sacrificial violence in Homer's Iliad*, (in: M. Wallace and Th. Smith 1994 p.45-70) analyzes clearly the pivotal position of Patroklos, But although he highlights Patroklos as a sacrificial victim, he ignores his striking identification to a maiden.
- vii. Of course, Iphigeneia is openly sacrificed, while Patroklos is said to weep like a girl calling for her mother, and not like a maiden to be sacrificed. But this should not dupe us. The sacrificial logic depends on rationalisations that turn the victim into a culprit by incriminating him/her/it with a breach of some social rule. These rules have everything to do with classificatory divides, as Mary Douglas has convincingly shown, in many anthropological studies. (see notably Douglas 1970 a & b).
- viii. L. Scubla, 1982. Although he mentions the paradigmatic shift for the numbers 3 and 4 in various African classifications, he fails to note how the useless and small can be called male, and the big and fertile female (as is common in the Banda language). See Eggen 1976, p.18/d
- ix. See M. Douglas, 1995 p.402-403.
- x. Many theologians point out that the Bible allots feminine attributes to God, whom it pictures a mother or nurse. (See Johnson 1995.) But the problem is not with God, but precisely with those gender related images. Many languages do not have gender divisions that can mark God grammatically either as masculine or feminine. English is most prone to convey masculinity to God, as it uses the non-neutral so rarely. If the masculine is used for the Holy Spirit in French or German, it carries no more gender connotation than to a table. English is in an exceptionally disadvantaged position on this score.
- xi. Depending on the system, this role may be quite important

indeed. But despite many studies, notably of matrilineal societies, no researcher has been able to declass as a western deformation of perspective, the thesis that kinship in all societies is built on the male control of the exchange of women, as bride-mothers, even if women often hold a decisive margin of choice.

xii. See E. Levinas 1977, ch.4: *Et Dieu créa la femme* (notably p.132).

xiii. The best-known studies about African creation stories are done in the Dogon-Bambara region by M.Griaule and G.Dieterlen (followed by their disciples and detractors). Dieterlen's *The Pale Fox* provoked curious speculations about possible contacts with Jewish-Christian sources, because the primordial Nommo that was sacrificed for the world's sake seemed so close to alleged christian motives.

xiv. The claim that the excision of the clitoris is a male device to curb female enjoyments and adulterous inclinations is truly mythical. The Banda (CAR) or Nafana (Ghana) stress the futility of such claims, as their women lack no delight in sexual contacts despite the excision. In a fierce attack on feminist attempts to outlaw excision, Martine Lefevre (using the material mentioned in n.13) mentions this view on the prepuce and clitoris, describing excision as a *rite de passage*, but without relating it to the biblical idea of the primordial unity. (See M.Lefevre, "Le devoir d'excision" in *La revue de MAUSS* 198,1 p.65-95.) Her point that this is the inscription of tribal identity in the flesh, rather than some male grip on women's sexual pleasure, is well taken. But it leaves unresolved the more fundamental enigma of the men controlling this tribal identity. The move to have the State outlaw excision is counterproductive, because it subordinates the women even more to the male order and risks to cut out the true ethical force, while only polarising the case. A remedy should come from elsewhere. Change in this kind of practices can never come from laws issued by that idol which is the State. (As E.Levinas is eager to stress, 1977, p.146). The case of the infibulation practised in some parts of East Africa is clearly different.

xv. The ideal of the prelapsarian unity, preceding sexual distinction, has appealed strongly to the first christians, leading to a gnostic or manichaeian rejection of sexual links as such. The famous Pauline texts about there being neither male nor female for those who 'put on Christ' which probably had a link to a baptismal formula, (see Gal 3:28; 1 Cor 12:13; Col 3:11), could thus lead to the opposite of the African initiation symbolism, by undoing rather than installing the divide. The gnostic *Gospel to the Egyptians*, developing these views, was close to the ascetic conclusions of some women in Corinth who favoured the suspension of all sexual contacts. Paul was

adamant in rejecting this. (See D. Wenham 1995 p.234-237 and 284-286). Levinas' Talmudic studies stress that the femininity - in its sexual sense of marking the divide and the procreative role - is indeed secondary to the spiritual union. (1977 p.134-135) But the notorious text of 1 Tim 2:14-15, which is often said to betray Paul's anti-feminist views, in fact confirms that, in the lapsarian state, women keep this God-given fertility as their dearest protection against discrimination.

xvi. Tillich's masterly constructed views in his *Systematic Theology* part 2 and 3 clearly leave many questions unsolved. Although he pays much attention to our estrangement, as a result of the Fall, and relates this also to the sexual concupiscence, he never acknowledges that the discriminating divide is at the heart of the predicament of sin. His view that Creation and the Fall are co-extensive, and that the latter centres in the *hubris* distorting the *human libido* (1968, II p.50 and 59) seems close to our analysis, which however holds that the *hubris* against God must be identified with the basic rivalry between humans.

xvii. Yet, no myth - unlike certain moralists - has ever declared the fact of sexual procreation evil in itself. It is puzzling how authors like St. Eudes, who came so close to declaring procreation an evil act - not so much because of the sexual delight involved, but because the newborn child was seen as ontologically contaminated with sin and a demonic being - could ever be canonised. This manichaean type of interpretation had been combatted by St. Augustine. but apparently to little avail.

xviii. It is not without interest to note the inversion: the menses mark a failed conception (negative sign of fertility), whereas the ritual killing is believed to have the positive power to bringing life.

xix. For a linguistic analysis of this see Eggen 1976, p.18,d/f.

xx. Scubla, L. 1982, p.103 taken from Pierres Clastres, 'Malheur du guerrier sauvage' in: *Libre n.2* 1977, p.101; also published in Clastres, P. *Recherche d'anthropologie politique*. Paris, 1980. (My Translation, WE).

xxi. The social isolation of priests and even kings in African and other traditions is not unknown, but needs much further study. In a yearly in Anloga (Ghana) the priest of a major shrine, dressed up in unusual colours, is the object of derision while he was driven to the Lagoon, where he finishes his ordeal by sending off a goat carrying the evils of the town into the wilderness, beyond the Lagoon. A clear parallel to the biblical scapegoat. There are similar rituals for chiefs, who may openly be insulted, as dirt and wizards. The intriguing rituals surrounding divine kingship, first summarised by James

Frazer in *The Golden Bow*, 1911 continue to fascinate anthropologists like J-Cl. Muller and Luc de Heusch. In our context, it may be meaningful to ask if the celibacy of the catholic priest could not be part of the will to sacrifice the sacrificer, thus aligning he priest with the other victims of the system he serves, more particularly: the women.

xxii. Here is not the place to join the discussion on the "I am"-formulas. Although there is little ground to link our text to the famous Ex 3:14 on God's name, we should pay attention to the prophetic weight of the "I am". To scale down the Greek formula linguistically may be useful, but it should not obfuscate that Jesus is pointing at himself in a prophetic manner.

xxiii. As it usually does, also by the editors of the 'Jerusalem Bible'.

xxiv. C. Chalier, "Ethics and the feminine". In: Bernasconi, 1991, p.119-129

xxv. I Tim 2:14 has attracted comments all through Christian history. Paul gave women a great role in the community, judged by Jewish standards. His key conviction is no doubt to be found in Gal 3:28, repudiating any distinction between male and female, in which he is deemed to be wholly in keeping with Jesus' practice. (See Wenham 1995 p.235-238 and further n.27).

xxvi. Many authors have warned that the unfounded claim about some mythical matriarchy in the past does no good to the women's cause, as it only shows that women were unable to hold on to it. See F.Héritier in: E. Sullerot, 1978, p.403. If we agree that such a myth actually has its roots in reality - albeit in the different sense, that men somehow recognise the primacy of the feminine fertility and its many gifts, which they may covet - we should acknowledge that what counts is not these psychological desires, but rather the structures distributing the social roles.

xxvii. Against those who refer to the notorious text of 1 Tim 2:11-15, to accuse Paul of a conservative attitude (e.g. A.Cameron in the article 'Neither male nor female' In: I.McAuslan & P.Walcot 1996, p.31) we should note, firstly, that most scholars now agree that this section is not Pauline. (See J.Murphy-O'Connor 1996, p.290 and D.Wenham 1995, p.236, who calls it even "mischievously un-Pauline".) An secondly, that this text as it stands, can be interpreted in a more positive manner. I Tim 2:14 does not blame Eve for the Fall as such, while exonerating Adam. On the contrary. Adam's guilt stands out as crucial precisely because it is not due to seduction, as Eve's trespass is. The logic of the verse is not that Eve should be silenced, because of her guilt, but because of her

vulnerability. Her task, so it claims, is not on this level. Paul, while rejecting any tendency to discard the sexually ordained female role of motherhood, urges women to stand their own within the congregation and to read Gen 3 as God's enduring support for their participation. Only, he insists that the part of our ministry which is to continue the crucified's work of undoing Adam's guilt, should remain primarily the men's task. To redeem the 'knowledge of good and evil' by teaching without a proclivity to judgmental discrimination is the challenge to men. Women are to redeem the distortions in the sacrificial system, once and for all, rather than introducing some new and eternally valid sacrifice. their own field. As Eve has allowed her love and care for Adam to turn into seduction, the task of Christian women consists of inverting this by showing men how to draw the water of life 'in the Spirit', without discriminating.

xxviii. To claim that the priest repeats the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross contradicts the logic of the Letter to the Hebrews proclaiming that Jesus annulled the sacrificial system once and for all, rather than introduced some new, eternally *valid sacrifice*.

xxix. See my article "Mary Magdalen's touch in a Family Church", in *New Blackfriar* October 1997 p.429-438.