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'Free God language': fired parish worker's thesis

Tom Roberts | Mar. 20, 2009

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In the same way that God acted to save the Israelites from captivity, God is ?acting now to free women from their captivity? and to free ?God language from the captivity of patriarchy,? wrote Ruth M. Kolpack, the pastoral associate recently fired by Madison, Wis., Bishop Robert Morlino, in an academic paper six years ago.

Central to the firing earlier this month was Morlino?s claim that her views of Jesus were ?off base,? according to Kolpack?s account of their 10-minute meeting, as well as his concern about the thesis that she had written. According to Kolpack, the bishop said he had read ?bits and pieces? of the paper.

The document in question actually comprises three papers totaling 51 pages of text and footnotes that investigate a comprehensive examination topic under the heading, ?Inclusive Language for Naming God: Challenge for the Church.?

The papers, dated January through March, deal with the subject, respectively, from the perspectives of scripture, systematic theology and moral theology. The papers were written to fulfill requirements for a master of divinity degree at St. Francis Seminary.

Read Ruth Kolpack's thesis: **Inclusive Language for Naming God: Challenge for the Church** [1] (undertaken in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Divinity Degree at St. Francis Seminary, Milwaukee, Wis., 2003)

Arguing that no language is adequate for naming or describing God, Kolpack said that we can use only metaphors ?based on what we know about God and yet all the metaphors we employ will not exhaust the description of God. When we limit the metaphors used for God, we make the metaphors our idols.?

Kolpack mines Second Isaiah for its use of feminine imagery, ?the only place in the Old Testament where God is explicitly compared to a mother.? The maternal images ? pregnancy, carrying a child in the womb, birth and breastfeeding ? used in the text ?provide us with images of intimacy and closeness different from that generated by male images. ? Second Isaiah did something that no one else has done in the Old Testament. He brought us into the intimacy of God through the use of maternal images.?

Such images are significant, she writes, because ?language shapes what we consider to be reality, in this case, the reality of who God is.? In that sense, the language of the Mass, for instance, owes a great deal to the patriarchal language of classical theism. Patriarchy, she notes, comes from Greek words meaning ?father? and ?ruler.? ?Socially, it means that men are the rulers. If men are the rules, it follows the women are the ruled.? What results, she writes, is ?the separation of females and males and the superiority of males over females.?

When God is referred to in predominantly male terms, people are led to ?accept male dominance,? she writes. Early church thinkers were part of a ?pattern of patriarchal anthropology,? she writes, noting that Augustine held that ?woman alone ? is not the image of God, ? the male alone, he is the image of God.? Aquinas accepted Aristotle?s definition of woman as being a ?misbegotten male? and so declared woman inferior in body and mind as well as morally. Woman?s only value was in procreation.?

Aquinas, she continued, considered male superiority part of the natural order. Luther held that ?woman had original equality but lost it through the Fall and became inferior as her punishment.? Theologian Karl Barth believed that man ?is over woman? as a matter of ?divinely ordained order.?

If language continues to ?maintain the inferiority of females, there will be no chance that female images will be acceptable language for God. Calling God ?She? would bring us face to face with our own sexism.?

Male only language for God distorts God?s image, she writes, because it is exclusive and ?God cannot exclude. God cannot be less than whole and naming God with exclusive language that eliminates women?s experience from expressing who God is limits God.?

If God is vested only with male images and qualities, believers are left with ?a God who excludes and discriminates against a significant segment of ?his? own creation.?

That exclusivism, she reasons, becomes one of the ?religious evils? in the same category as Christian preachers attacking Islam as a false religion or claiming that God doesn?t hear the prayers of non-Christians; Muslim extremists promising paradise for suicide bombers; or ?the Catholic hierarchy?s claim that only males were chosen by Jesus to be apostles and so only males can be ordained.?

She cites as an example of the ?evil of literalism,? the late Pope John Paul II?s apostolic letter ?Ordinatio Sacredotalis.? The document, she writes, is an example of ?dual anthropology? that often is applied to women in the church,. ?Women are ?necessary and irreplaceable? in the church as ?martyrs, virgins and mothers.? On the one hand, John Paul is accepting women?s role in the church but, on the other hand, is relegating them to the home to be physical mothers or to religious life to be spiritual mothers.?

In the document, John Paul three times mentions that the church cannot ordain women because Christ chose only men and only 12 men. ?If this literalism were followed through in every way,? she writes,? there would be only twelve priests in the church and they would all be Jewish Middle Eastern men.? The purpose of such a ?literalist argument ? appears to be to exclude women from ordination,? she said.

Still, Kolpack finds ?signs of hope? for ?advancing a fuller recognition of the dignity of women? in the church. She sees it in some church documents and the work of theologians.

Since the Second Vatican Council, she writes, church documents have incorporated language ?about equality and the participation of women in public life,? including the right to work and to be involved in cultural, economic, social and political life.

She noted that in the late 20th century, ?the United States bishops explicitly named ?sexism? a sin and that the

Quebec bishops, in a statement on domestic violence, accepted ?on behalf of the church partial responsibility for violence against women? because of counseling women not to leave an abusive marriage.?

Feminist theologians, she writes, are increasingly pushing the church to expand its scholarship to move beyond exclusive patriarchal interpretations of scripture and to advance the cause of inclusive language in church texts and prayers.

?Vatican II emphasized that the Word of God was entrusted to ?the entire church? but feminists are asking ?how that Word can be heard and proclaimed if the people of God are not listened to or even consulted???

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