

PAINLESS FEMINISM IN THE CHURCH, OR
MINIMIZING THE COSTS & MAXIMIZING THE BENEFITS OF
THE COSTS/BENEFITS RATIO

2370 21 Nov 89

ELLIOTT THINKSHEETS

309 L.Eliz.Dr., Craigville, MA 02636
Phone 508.775.8008
Noncommercial reproduction permitted

Phonecall today from an ecclesiarch concerned more about damage control (minimizing costs) as feminism seeps into his (not our) denomination--& thus my tongue-in-cheek title for this Thinksheet, which he was hoping I'd do for him. Not that he sees no benefits. But, being in charge of the continuing education of clergy in his area, he senses an oncoming tide of troubles & dangers, so he's running scared or at least worried. At the phonecall's end, he said "You said so much so fast, I'll have to phone again & record it." This Thinksheet is to ward off that phonecall. I'm putting words in his mouth, telling him what he should say, which may stimulate him, in self-defense if nothing else, to say what he should.

1. "Painless feminism"? My dentist, being state-of-the-art, has an old "Painless Dentistry" shingle out. The joke is that "painless" gets you to thinking about pain, & there's some truth there even with the most modern toothperson. And there can't be any completely painless feminism, either. The Palestinians, in 1947 & ever since, haven't found the UN's creation of the State of Israel painless: the former lost something, viz land. Feminism is a somewhat just **invasion of male territory**, & even feminist males like me feel some pain, though less than gain. S.Africa's whites, as they yield "space" (literal & metaphorical) to nonwhites, will gain more than they lose, but apartheid's dying is painful for those who've had it all their way. Intelligent-compassionate women are aware of & sympathetic for male suffering in the in/voluntary surrender of male privileges, male bastions. Fewer costs, in backlash, when males are made aware of that awareness & sympathy.

2. **Deformity** (original sin & all that) characterizes not only all prejudicial isms (sexism, racism, classism, political chauvinism, et al) but also, in both theory & praxis, all reactions thereagainst. Thus, above, "feminism is...somewhat just," somewhat unjust--the latter, more in praxis than in theory. The Renaissance-hermetic symbol of evil is a snake with three heads: a lion's (central: arrogance, excess), a dog's (lust), & a wolf's (fear): the sexes being equally evil (as well as good), feminism is polluted by sin, especially by excessive (theoretical) claims & (practical) demands. The catch, & fear-&-trembling invitation to be kinder-gentler: **nobody knows** where the line is, so "excess" is a matter of running opinion. Is biology still, in any sense, destiny? I believe in partnership marriage, & that the natural-genetic-hormonal leader in a particular marriage is a matter of observation, not dogma. But sperm seeks ovum, so (?) boy will more often seek girl than girl, boy; & man will, more often than woman, take the lead in a marriage. But even if my "so" holds in both cases, the partnership relation is horizontal, & the initiative is not always from one side. Even if the initiative is thought of by the over/under spatial metaphor, the relationship is not hierarchical-vertical. Rather, whichever partner is at the moment taking the lead is over-above; & thus my "the mutual superiority of the sexes." Taking the "foundational" view of Scripture, as I do, I hold this view of marriage to be the most scriptural. Further, I hold it to be the ideal in relations between the sexes outside of marriage, in church & world. Eg, opposition to the ordination of women is a form of resisting the Spirit, who is not, & never has been, sexist in choosing leaders.

3. The equation woman:**nature**::man:**culture** is looking more & more (1) true & (2) egalitarian. In parallel consciousness-raising, we're coming to understand the terrible costs of suppressing the voices of women & nature: feminism & ecology are one tandem cause. One inference from this is that men will be wise to "listen up" harder when women speak of themselves & of the environment.

4. And when they speak of **language**, which as culture is primarily a male-originated, male-shaped, & male-polluted product (parallelly, of course, female products being female-polluted, women having some ways of sinning men haven't, as also sharing with men some ways of sinning). If language were a female product, "**inclusive language**" would mean how to correct language, spoken & written, for female sexism, for its tilt toward the feminine. As we all know, the reverse is true. Which presents some questions:

(1) Language being a culture's most durable & thus least changeable product, to what extent, if any, can we expect a language to adjust to an emergent social sensi-

tivity? If the sensitivity develops social sanctions with enough energy (which means, if enough of the populace is willing to "call," to punish on the spot, miscreants who violate the new speech-taboos), pejorative terms can be knocked out of the public lexicon. Recently a selectman in our town was bounced out of his job for using publicly two sexist words you can hear in any Irish pub: cleaning up the Irish pub (yes, & other ethnic pubs!) will take a little longer. (Yes, he's Irish.)

(2) Andro-generic nouns are somewhat tougher. We can say "one," "a person," "an individual," "a human being." But I'm afraid we're going to have to keep the andro-generic couplings in religion (man/God) & science (man/nature, man/cosmos, man/animals, man/plants).... Andro-generic pronouns are even tougher. OK when we're speaking to God, & I often use 2nd person to avoid the problem in the 3rd. person singular: singular & plural "you" is nonsexist. How about "they/their/them" for "he/his/him"? OK, with some historical support; but strainful, awkward, often in context ambiguous. For a while I used the barbarous "hisr," though I never stooped to the idiotic alternation of the sexual pronouns. Conclusion: We should fight this one, teaching & practicing other locutions than andro-generic pronouns. It's natural with me now, & I feel guilty, as I should, when I slip. But the historical weight of the language, both in its literature & in its momentum, will fight this change: we may lose.

(3) "He" in reference to the biblical God is masculine, not andro-generic. The biblical God is, however, not male: he has no consort, as all heterosexual male deities do. On the contrary, being equally the Source of female & male, he must not be thought of as male; but in that he takes the lead in creating, & communicating with, us, he must be viewed as masculine, & consistently is so in Scripture, the few metaphor-feminine instances testing the rule. (Why then not "andro-generic"? Because "generic" masculine implies the presence of the female, & the Bible is against all female deities, all goddesses.) But some are going to ridiculous lengths of barbarous style to avoid the masculine pronoun for God: recently I counted "God" 46 times on one page! Division: Some use "God" (masculine, antonym of "goddess"), "Lord," "King," "Father," "Son" but not the masculine pronouns for God. Others, including me, use both the masculine titles & the masculine pronouns. I see no hope that the Bible's nouns-pronouns way of referring to God will wash out, either nouns or pronouns, from "the language of Zion," the church's language.

(4) Radical feminism rejects all masculine references to God, both substantival & pronominal. Some teach God the Androgyn. Some collapse the transcendent into the immanent, producing feminist pan(en)theism, weighting the equation on the "woman:nature" side. These latter are in process of creating a new religion. As I put it in the last § of "The Four Deities of 'the West'" (#2359), "The God/dess is, though as yet unnamed, the deity of 'women-church,' one of two recent forms of feminist religion, the other being wicca. Acknowledging that the biblical God is dominantly masculine, this religion maximizes the divine-feminist biblical materials & draws both differentia & sanctions from both history of religions & philosophy of religion. One of its projects is to create its own scripture by rewriting the Christian Bible" (underlining not in #2359).

(5) The inclusive-language Bible, toward which the Inclusive Language Lectionary is leading, is a put-on by put-upons (those who feel that the Bible itself so "puts upon," oppresses, women that it should not be used publicly in unexpurgated, unfumigated form). If it catches on:

(a) The children's children will never touch a Bible, any more than do today's adults the Pseudepigrapha. Today's public is largely ignorant of Scripture: tomorrow's will be, worse, alienated therefrom. The benefit of ridding the Bible of "sexist language" will be overwhelmed by the cost in alienation, a public that couldn't care less about the Bible in any form. Even to clergy it'll become a strange book.

(b) Jesus & Christology will fade as an embarrassment, that old masculine God having become on earth only a male. Efforts will be made to replace with "the Spirit," understood as androgynous or even feminine (despite the Spirit's appearing as male [the Virgin Birth] & never as female, though Heb. & Gk. "wisdom" is feminine).

(c) A bad precedent, radical revisionistic censorship, will have been set. Bowdler was laughed at for doing it to Shakespeare: for me it's a nightmare to think that the bowdlerization of the Bible might not be laughed at. And what will happen to all the rest of the world's classic literature? Will the dismissive spirit rape it all?