Gender Roles in Family and Culture:
The Basis of Sexism in Religion

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Every human culture has treated men and women differently. This was true, as far as we can tell, in prehistoric societies, and we have records showing that it has always been true in the civilizations that have preceded ours. It is also the case in every society and in every culture in the world today, whether that culture be tribal, nomadic, sedentary, agricultural, industrial, or postindustrial. Differential treatment of men and women according to their sex appears to be endemic to the human condition.

The differentiation of gender roles does not always favour one sex over another, however. The dominant pattern in human history (and prehistory) gives greater power and privilege to males rather than females, and it is commonly referred to as ‘patriarchy,’ from Greek roots meaning ‘father’ and ‘rule.’ The opposite pattern, ‘matriarchy’ or mother rule, is overt in some cultures and covert in others, but it is definitively in the minority both in the past and in the present. A balance of power between the sexes, such as might be found in an ‘egalitarian’ society, is even more rare. It exists in a limited number of tribal cultures; in small, experimental communities; and in some contemporary marriages. It is also alive in the human imagination, especially among people who are oppressed, persecuted, and powerless. The vision of such a society appears to have existed in the imagination of Jesus of Nazareth, and there is good evidence that the earliest Christian communities were, if not totally egalitarian, considerably less patriarchal than the societies that surrounded them.¹

The existence of gender roles in a religion founded by someone who apparently favoured greater gender equality is something of an anomaly, especially when during most of that religion’s history the bias in
favour of men has been so great that it merits the name ‘sexism.’ In the chapters below, we see how women have been regarded and treated in Christian history, especially in marriage and ministry. Some chapters emphasize gender roles in the Christian community; others, patriarchy and sexism or the unequal treatment of women. The business of this opening chapter is to introduce some basic concepts and to lay a groundwork for what follows. The closing chapter inquires about possibilities for the future.

Gender Roles

The purpose of gender roles in nature and society is, in a word, efficiency. Closely connected are survival and satisfaction, for gender roles assist in the survival of biological and social groups, and they also contribute to the satisfaction of individuals within groups. Gender roles are an efficient social mechanism for ensuring group survival: when all know their place, the group functions well. Gender roles are also an efficient means of providing individual satisfaction: when everyone knows his or her place, individuals have a sense of belonging and purpose.

In an evolutionary scheme of things, gender roles are an outgrowth of the process of diversification and specialization in nature. The simplest one-celled creatures are not much different from one another, and their one cell must do everything that a living organism is capable of doing in order to survive - namely, ingesting, excreting, and reproducing. In multi-celled plants and animals, cells begin to diversify and specialize in function: in plants, leaves look and function differently from roots, and so on; in animals, eyes and ears, hair and feather follicles, nervous systems and digestive systems are composed of specialized cells performing diverse functions. If an individual is a community of cells, the development of cell roles makes possible the evolution of larger and more complex individuals.

At the societal level, individuals themselves are analogous to cells. As a solitary individual, the survivor of a shipwreck on a deserted island must do everything for himself or herself, much as an individual paramecium must do everything for itself. Unlike the single-celled creature, however, the solitary human and in fact all solitary animals cannot reproduce alone. Early in evolutionary development, even before the full differentiation of animals from plants, sexual specialization emerged as a means of ensuring diversity and adaptability in reproduction - a simple and efficient method of guaranteeing the survival and
evolution of species. Sexual specialization in mammals and primates brought with it the development of sex roles, or tasks that individuals of one sex performed either exclusively (such as nursing the young) or predominantly (such as hunting). Sex roles in the animal world ensure that the work of the group (flock, pack, pride, herd, and so on) gets done and that the individuals in the group know their status and function within it. In many species of animals, social differentiation occurs on the basis not only of sex but also of size and strength; hence the pecking order of chickens and the dominance hierarchy of horses and deer. In mammals with more complex brains, such as primates, social differentiation takes place on the basis of other factors as well, such as age and family relationships.³

Human social diversification and specialization are even more complex. Hence it is proper to speak about gender roles rather than sex roles. Sex roles deal primarily with place and function with regard to reproduction and survival; gender roles include these but also entail a great variety of social, symbolic, and satisfaction functions as well.⁴ Gender roles define not only how girls relate to boys and how men relate to women but also how girls relate to other girls and to women, how males of any age relate to various places and activities, and so on and so forth. In other words, gender roles move beyond simple sex roles and involve the complexity of human society and culture.⁵

As noted above, the vast majority of human cultures were and still are patriarchal in structure. Whenever one sex dominates another in a culture, however, the reason is commonly not efficiency but the symbolic exercise of power. Gender roles are of course found in egalitarian societies: a finite number of tasks need to be accomplished by a group (such as foraging, fishing, trapping, constructing dwellings, rearing children, and making clothes and tools), and in simple societies these are often parcelled out to one sex or another, though not always to the same sex in each society. Patriarchy and matriarchy, however, are cultural expressions of power – usually over the food supply.⁶

In prehistoric societies, since males were free of the physical restrictions that pregnancy and nursing place on females, they were able to develop hunting skills that put them in control of tasty and nutritious protein in the form of meat. Hunters could command favours in return for the food that they supplied, and they could also demand obedience and subservience. Patterns of power and control, once established, could be readily perpetuated, even in agricultural societies where women's work equalled that of men. Thus patriarchy or male domi-
nance, once initiated in prehistoric hunting-gathering societies, tended to predominate in ancient agricultural civilizations.\textsuperscript{7}

Even today the patriarchal ordering of society continues wherever men are the primary providers for the family, and even where women work equally hard as men women are not equally rewarded. Patriarchy entails the inherent injustice of perpetually unequal treatment of the sexes, not to mention the myriad injustices and insults that derive from the abuse of power. Yet patriarchal forces are today diminishing under the pressure of women’s increased educational, economic, and political power. Moreover, patriarchal structures are themselves under attack by women and men alike, who are philosophically committed to the existence of human rights, who are morally bound to the promotion of fairness, and who are religiously inspired by the gospel of Jesus.

Patriarchy in Western Culture

Though many cultures around the world have been ruled by patriarchal social structures, Christianity has been influenced mainly by patriarchy in Middle Eastern and European cultures. A brief review of those cultures serves both as an overview of this book and as an introduction to its chapters.

Ancient Israel

Relations between the sexes in the ancient Mediterranean world were what can be called ‘utilitarian’ or ‘instrumental.’ Family structures and marriage customs show that women were largely regarded as commodities to be used by men for their benefit and for that of families headed by men.\textsuperscript{8}

Biblical narratives from Abraham forward describe an Israel that was unquestionably and unquestioningly patriarchal. The main characters in Jewish legend and history are male; men are the actors, and women are (along with animals, land, and other possessions) acted on. The most important women in biblical literature (such as Sarah, the wife of Abraham, and Miriam, the sister of Moses) play minor roles at best. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob – father, son, and grandson – are referred to by biblical scholars as patriarchs, and all three were polygamous. Each in his turn headed an extended nomadic family, and just as each had many oxen and camels, he also had a number of wives. The children to whom the wives gave birth were considered the children of the patri-
arch, and for the most part female offspring are not even mentioned in the surviving narratives.

In the book of Genesis, Abraham passes off Sarah as his sister (and therefore sexually available to local potentates with whom Abraham is currying favour), as does Isaac, his wife Rebecca (Gen. 12:10-20; 20:1-7; 26:1-11), though in none of the cases does the deception result in the wife's being sexually used by a man who is not her husband. Similarly, Lot offers his two daughters to the men of Sodom to use as they will in exchange for safety, and the girls avoid this fate only because the men will not be deterred from their intention to violate the rules of hospitality (Gen. 19:4-11). The power of the male head of household to dispose of the females under his authority, however, is never questioned. Of course, power of a father over children extends to sons as well, as is clear from the story of Abraham and Isaac (Gen. 22:1-14). Patriarchal authority in some societies is absolute.

Though stories of the great men in Hebrew literature at times intimate the existence of romance, the love in question is akin more to the love of a teenage boy for a flashy car than to the mutual attraction of mature adults. Jacob falls in love with Rachel, who is shapely and beautiful, rather than with her older sister Leah; but their father, Laban, makes Jacob take Leah as a condition for getting Rachel, so Jacob is able to start married life with two wives instead of one (Gen. 29:15-30). Earlier in the narrative, Isaac was not so lucky: he never laid eyes on the girl whom his father had obtained for him until she arrived to be his wife (Gen. 24:62-7). The stories do not even mention the girls' feelings about their fate or about the men to whom they are given.

The patriarchs and later the kings of Israel had concubines as well as wives, concubines being females to whom the head of a household had sexual access but to whom no family responsibility was owed. Thus concubines and their children could be dismissed if their presence was unwanted for any reason. According to the biblical history, the servant Hagar and her son (by Abraham) Ishmael were sent into the desert after Abraham had a son by his wife, Sarah (Gen. 21:8-14), and later Abraham sent away the sons of other concubines who might be rivals to Isaac (Gen. 25:6). Esau, Isaac, and Jacob had children by a number of wives and concubines, as did David and Solomon later (cf. II Sam. 3:2-5; I Kings 11:3). Solomon's seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines were listed shortly after his gold and ivory, his chariots and horses (I Kings 10:24-29). The king did not have a personal relationship with these women; they were his property.
The Ten Commandments in their historical context were originally addressed to Israelite males and regarded primarily their relationship with other Israelite males. The commandments 'Thou shalt not kill' and 'Thou shalt not steal,' for example, forbade killing and stealing from other Israelites (cf. Ex. 20:1-17); this left Israelites free to kill and plunder their neighbours, which they did when they could get away with it. The original sexist nature of the Decalogue is clear in Ex. 20:5, which speaks about fathers, sons, grandsons, and great-grandsons, but not about women. Verse 17 was obviously addressed to men, for it enjoined the listeners to refrain from coveting a neighbour’s house, wife, servant, ox or donkey – things that could be owned only by men. Thus the commandment against adultery was a prohibition against ruining another man’s possession; adultery in the Jewish world was not so much a sexual sin as a violation of a property right. Since men could acquire and dispose of property, men could divorce their wives, but women had no parallel right (Deut. 24:1-4). Indeed, the question did not even arise, for how could a possession get rid of its owner?

Graeco-Roman Culture

Marriage in ancient Greece and Rome was with few exceptions an arrangement between parents (that is, fathers) or their surrogates, not between the spouses themselves. Marriage relations were instrumental, centred on the preservation of the family name and the continuation of the state. Husbands and wives were not expected to have a close relationship: rather, theirs was a practical division of labour, with the man interacting on behalf of the family in the public sphere and the woman remaining in the domestic sphere. Men sought companionship not with their wives but with other men, as did women with other women. Men were also allowed to satisfy their sexual desires with women other than their wives, while the converse of course was forbidden to women. Indeed, men were not expected to be sexually attracted to their own wives, and women were not supposed to be sexually attracted to men at all. To have children, they performed their ‘marital duty.’

Though women wielded some power in the home, men governed the structure and functioning of public society. The confinement of women to the home and the non-confinement of men made possible a public life entirely dominated by men. Men could become successful through education in rhetoric and law, and they could advance through military and political skill; such opportunities were not available to women. In Greek
city-states and in the Roman republic, men could divorce their wives with relative ease. When dismissed from her husband's house, the woman returned to her father, while all assets and children remained with the father of the family, the paterfamilias. The wife, being a commodity or family asset, owned nothing.\textsuperscript{12}

The paterfamilias enjoyed an absolute right over all of his assets, including his children. He could order an infant born with some defect (especially if it were female) to be taken out to an uninhabited area and left to die. He could punish his own children with impunity, and even beat them to death. He could also order the death of a child who had not yet reached adulthood, but understandably this male prerogative was seldom invoked. The family and public implications of such a decision might be harder to live with than the obstreperous offspring.\textsuperscript{13}

The radical imbalance in favour of men began to be righted somewhat in the later years of the Roman republic and the early years of the empire, at least for women in the higher social and economic orders. When men went off to war, their wives were left in charge of domestic affairs – both those that were normally in their province and now those that entailed relationships outside the home as well. Women thus gained economic power, and, if their husbands did not return from their military exploits, they kept it – at least until they married again. Enjoying their new-found freedom, and given the scarcity of eligible men, widows often chose not to remarry until their sons came of age and inherited their father's property. Some women, however, chose to parlay their position and wealth into concessions from would-be suitors.\textsuperscript{14}

By the time of the Roman empire, women as well as men could freely enter into marriage without their parents' consent, and women as well as men could divorce their spouses. According to Roman law, if marriage was by consent of the spouses, when the consent ended so did the marriage. Still, few children could afford to marry without their parents' consent. Among the common people, and especially in rural areas, girls were still given away or handed over at the onset of puberty to the boys (or the older men) to whom they were betrothed. They thus passed from the possession of their father to the possession of their husband, never being legal or social persons in their own right.\textsuperscript{15}

When the Roman empire in the fourth century adopted Christianity as its state religion, not much was different for women than it had been under the worship of the old pagan gods. Though women had experienced some equality with men in the earliest days of the Jesus movement, by the end of the first century this innovation was beginning to be
lost, and by the time the once-outlawed religion became socially acceptable, equality had absolutely vanished.\textsuperscript{16}

In Christianity as in Judaism before it, the inequality in the social status of women was linked with inequality in religious functioning. Whereas the religions of Greece and Rome accepted women as priestesses and prophetesses, classical Christianity from the second century onward (in contrast with early Christianity in its first decades) began excluding women from religious leadership. In other words, ancient pagan religions did not necessarily link social status and religious roles: even though women in general had inferior social status, women with special roles in religion had a social status superior to that of the average man. Christianity, however, did not permit this to happen: the inferior status of women barred them from any religious role that placed them over men.\textsuperscript{17}

The inferiority of women was ideologized by classical Christian (i.e., male) authors. Religious intellectuals developed an ideology that justified the low social position of women and explained why women could not aspire to leadership in the church. One key element in this ideology was the idea that woman was created after man. Another element was the belief that a woman committed the first sin. These two concepts were repeated over and over by male Christian writers from the second century on.

They can be found even in one of the books of the Bible, the First Epistle to Timothy, written not by Paul but by a later writer using his name, around the end of the first century. At one point, the author declares, 'I do not allow women to teach or have any authority over men; they must keep quiet. For Adam was created first, and then Eve' (I Tim. 2:12-13). Even though the fact that one creature is made before another does not imply that the earlier is better than the later (in the first account of creation, for example, the other animals are created before human beings), this author uses the creation of Adam before Eve to prove that men are superior to women and therefore that women cannot be given authority over men. The illogic of the argument is a sure sign of ideological thinking.

The second element in the ideology of male superiority follows closely on the first. 'It was not Adam who was led astray but the woman: she was deceived into transgression' (I Tim. 2:14). Again here, there is no logical connection between being the first to sin and being inferior, though there is perhaps a psychological or a symbolic connection. That is, the idea of woman's subordination to man can be symboli-
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cally expressed in a story that assigns blame to the first one to do something wrong. Such psychological and symbolic connections are likewise symptomatic of ideological thinking.

The Christian ideology of patriarchy, or the set of ideas used to explain and justify patriarchy, was not limited to these two concepts, but they were crucial to its becoming accepted. Once male leaders in the church were able to find first Old Testament texts and then New Testament texts that could be used to exclude women from leadership, the fate of women was sealed. The social hierarchy of the Graeco-Roman world became the ecclesiastical hierarchy of the Christian church, and the Bible was used to prove that the subordination of women was ordered by God.\textsuperscript{18}

\textit{Medieval Christendom}

Just as women in ancient Rome had been able to assume roles normally assigned to men during periods of war, women at the beginning of the Middle Ages were able to achieve leadership roles in society and the Church during the turbulent period popularly known as the Dark Ages. These women were the exception rather than the rule, but there was enough looseness in the social structure to allow at least some females to penetrate the barriers that had excluded them from leadership in the Christianized Roman empire.

The leadership roles in the church that women were able to assume were few enough: as Christian girls were married off to pagan boys, they could be evangelizers, taking the faith to an increasing number of Germanic tribes; as founders and abbesses of monasteries, they could be monastic leaders of celibate women’s communities and occasionally of paired communities of women and men; as mystics and saints, they could be spiritual guides to women and men alike. These roles were relatively minor when compared to the overall governance of the church, and they were also new, for they had not existed in the now-defunct empire. In the fluid situation that accompanied barbarian invasion and settlement, women were able to take initiatives and do things that were intelligent and creative, regardless of the fact that females had not done them before. The decline of scholarship during the Dark Ages also helped women, for men were less aware of the ideological arguments that centuries before had been used to keep Christian women in positions of subservience to men. Whatever freedom women had achieved in the Roman empire with
regard to marriage, moreover, was lost in the Middle Ages. Germanic culture dictated that a woman be transferred from the household of her father to the household of her husband; in this respect, Germanic custom was similar to the custom of the ancient Israelites. Thus girls were never allowed to choose their own husbands, but since boys were usually not given a choice by their parents either, there was not much disparity of privilege. Unlike the Jews, however, the new Christians of northern Europe had virtually no tradition of divorce (though exceptions could be made when politically arranged marriages became politically inexpedient). The permanence of Germanic marriage, when buttressed in the twelfth century by an ideological usage of selected biblical texts, became the indissolubility of Christian marriage. Thus women in medieval Christianity were locked into patriarchal marriage arrangements that were by definition almost always disadvantageous to them.

If the eleventh century saw the end of the Dark Ages (by the year 1000, virtually all the tribes of Europe had been converted to Christianity), the twelfth century saw the dawning of a new era of scholarship. Monastery writing rooms developed into schools as monks began finding the leisure actually to read and attempt to comprehend the manuscripts that had been preserved through centuries of copying by hand. Cathedral schools grew as medieval cities grew, and they evolved into a new type of academic institution – the university – which brought together scholars from all the known arts and sciences. Western Europe came in contact with the East when crusaders returned home with loot that included writings by early Christian theologians, Greek philosophers, and Islamic intellectuals. In the universities, a method was devised to compare and contrast similar and opposing viewpoints of human and divine authors. Since it was developed in schools, it was called the scholastic method, and the intellectual style that it fostered was known as scholasticism.

The thirteenth century saw the high point of scholasticism as it was practised by such capable and brilliant scholars as Albert the Great, Thomas Aquinas, and Bonaventure. These men (there were no women scholastics because formal education was exclusively male) produced a new synthesis of ancient and contemporary, pagan and Christian thinking. Since the writings from which they drew, however, were inherently patriarchal, the medieval synthesis they produced was unavoidably patriarchal as well. The ancient ideology of women's inferiority was rediscovered and given currency. In addition, since the scholastics had
access to ancient philosophical writings, the theological arguments of the past were now reinforced by philosophical arguments as well. Women could now be proven to be inferior because of 'natural' differences between the sexes: men were by nature fit to think and rule, whereas women were by nature more emotional and in need of being ruled. The ideology of male superiority was thus supported not only by ideas found in scripture but also by those supposedly inferred from nature.21

Needless to say, whatever freedom women had experienced during the social flux of the Dark Ages was stifled by the social stability of the high Middle Ages. Thanks to the scholastics, moreover, Christian society was provided with both theological and philosophical explanations of why women were — and therefore should be — subject to men. This situation did not change in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, either, as the later Middle Ages blended into the early Renaissance.

Modern Europe

If modern Europe emerged from its medieval matrix during the Renaissance, modern Christianity broke from medieval Christianity during the Protestant Reformation. The Reformation was a religious expression of the cultural revolution that was occurring during the Renaissance.

The Protestant Reformation — as well as the so-called Catholic Counter-Reformation which began about a half-century afterward — brought about a host of structural and theological changes in Christianity. Martin Luther in 1517 challenged the authority of the hierarchy to offer promises of salvation, to collect church taxes, and to restrict the reading of the Bible. Luther’s doctrine of salvation by faith rather than by works removed incentives to the monastic life, his extolling of marriage over celibacy encouraged monks and nuns to marry, and his interpretation of the priesthood of all the faithful made ministry available to all who felt called to serve the church.

Not much later, Ulrich Zwingli and John Calvin took the momentum of Luther’s reform and used it to develop even more revolutionary practices and doctrines. All sacraments were eliminated except baptism and the Lord’s supper (i.e., eucharist), for these were the only two that were clearly attested to in the New Testament. The complex international structure of the Roman church was replaced with a simpler model of the local church found in the epistles and in the Acts of the Apostles. The philosophical explanation of Christian doctrine, common in both patris-
tic and scholastic theology, was discredited and gave way to a purely theological mode of explanation that relied heavily on a more literal interpretation of scripture.

In none of this revolutionary activity, however, was anything done to change the low social status of women. The patriarchy of the Middle Ages passed through that of the Renaissance to become the patriarchy of modern culture—essentially unchallenged and unchanged. The academic justifications for the subjugation of women changed from being partly philosophical to being purely theological and from being based on church doctrine to being based on scriptural teaching, but the subjugation of women remained. The intellectual appreciation of womanhood changed from the honouring of the Blessed Virgin and virgin saints to the exaltation of the married women of the Bible, but this did not shift the status of women. If anything, the low social status of women was reinforced by the high theological esteem they were given: women were taught that a life of obedience and submission to men was praised and rewarded by God. At most, some of the social roles available to females changed (they could no longer be celibates, monastics, or mystics; rather, they should all be married, housewives, and mothers), but their low social status relative to men was unaltered.

The Catholic Counter-Reformation attempted to meet the challenge of the Protestant Reformation by cleaning house, but it did little to rearrange the furniture. The Catholic church reformed its methods of appointing bishops, training priests, and celebrating the sacraments, but it did not alter any of the ecclesiastical structures that had evolved during the first fifteen centuries of Christianity. Women’s monastic orders remained, and new religious orders were approved to perform charitable works outside convent walls, but these orders of women always had to be under the supervision of men. Catholic married women, like their Protestant counterparts, were expected to be subservient to their husbands.

Just as the medieval organization of Catholicism remained intact during the modern centuries, so also did the scholastic justification of that organization and the position of women at the bottom. Though Catholicism never raised the Pauline utterances about the role of women to the level of church doctrine, it justified the subjugation of women in the practical sphere of church law by appealing to those same texts. In a church sharply divided between clergy and laity, women were never admitted to the ranks of the clergy, yet females in religious orders (like those in Catholic families) did not have status in their own right. Nuns
were considered 'married to God' or 'married to the Church,' so even though they were celibate and single they were metaphorically regarded as married and therefore subject to the wills of men – that is, to the male clergy to whom they were accountable.\(^{23}\)

The increasing secularization of modern culture posed a greater challenge to medieval patriarchy than did traditional Protestantism. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, some women began to break the mould into which men would cast them by being poets and playwrights, novelists and painters, even though they often enough had to hide their authorship under male pseudonyms. Pioneer women in the frontier territories of North America escaped many of the social restrictions of civilization by being equal partners with men, who, for their own reasons, prized the freedom of the wilderness over the security of civilization. In the nineteenth century and increasingly in the twentieth, women of genius and courage moved into fields previously dominated by men, creating professional roles for themselves primarily in education and health care but also, to a lesser extent, in science and business. Slowly the assumptions and structures of religiously reinforced patriarchy were being bypassed and challenged.\(^{24}\)

In Christianity itself, the greatest room for the expansion of women's roles was found at the fringes of modern denominationalism, in radical groups such as Quakers and Shakers; in utopian communities such as Oneida in New York, Harmony in Indiana, and the Amana colonies in Iowa; and in holiness movements such as pietism and perfectionism, revivalism and pentecostalism. The belief in congregational autonomy, present in some Protestant traditions, permitted independently-minded congregations to call women as well as men to the ministry. Likewise, the belief in the freedom of the Holy Spirit, prevalent in some evangelical traditions, allowed certain Protestants to affirm that charisms of leadership and ministry could be bestowed on anyone God chose, including women.

Opposition to the slave trade in Europe had been spearheaded by Protestant evangelicals who found slavery detestable on human grounds and contrary to the fundamental teachings of the New Testament, even though isolated texts could be dug up to support the practice. When the British slave trade was abolished in 1808, evangelicals turned their attention to the United States, where slavery itself was still legal. Many in the abolitionist movement, especially as it spread to mainstream Protestant denominations in the northern states, were women who did the drudge work of organization and solicitation, even
though the most prominent speakers against slavery were men. None the less, the experience of working for the liberation of others raised the consciousness of women, and they began to notice the parallels between the servitude of blacks and their own subjugation. After the American slaves were emancipated by presidential decree and enfranchised by constitutional amendment, women began working for their own civil liberties.  

Women succeeded in securing the right to vote in Canada in 1918, and in the United States in 1920, partly by shaming democratic governments with the fact that half their citizens were excluded from democracy, and partly by persuading the public that women who served heroically as nurses in the world war and who supported the war effort at home deserved the franchise. The Second World War likewise broke down stereotypes and ideologies of female inferiority, this time because women served not only as nurses but also in the armed forces (though not yet in battle positions) and because women proved themselves in European resistance movements and in North American factories. After the war, women were expected to step aside and resume their deference to men, but this return to the sexism of the past lasted only through the ‘happy days’ of the 1950s.

The Beginning of the End of Patriarchy

Women since the nineteenth century had been striving for equality of status, largely in the public arena of civil rights, but it was not until the twentieth century that the social upheaval of two world wars and their aftermath began to make this possible. During the wars, women out of necessity took on roles of a higher status than those normally assigned to them by society, proving that they could competently fill them. Just as women in ancient Rome gained economic power when their husbands and sons were away at war, and just as those in medieval Europe gained social power during the turmoil of the barbarian invasions, so also their successors in the twentieth century gained both economic and social power by doing in wartime what they were not permitted to do in peacetime. They did this by moving into the labour force, securing the right to vote, and demanding the rights of citizens.

One of these rights is education, and during the 1950s and 1960s women increasingly took advantage of relatively inexpensive college and university programs to pursue undergraduate and graduate degrees. Economic changes in the 1970s made it increasingly necessary...
for households to have two incomes in order to increase (and in many cases to maintain) the standard of living achievable in earlier decades on a single income. The 1970s also saw great changes in the divorce laws of many nations, and, with the introduction of no-fault divorce (i.e., by mutual consent rather than by court litigation), divorce rates climbed to new heights. Divorced women found themselves thrown into the workforce, and, having to support themselves and dependent children, they could no longer afford to work for the same low wages with which they had been content as married women working for supplemental income. Women with higher education and professional job skills began to demand equal pay for equal work.\(^27\)

All these factors fuelled the feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s, as did the general social ferment of that era. Disillusionment with the Cold War that replaced the promised peace following the Second World War, disenchantment with the arms race and the U.S. war in Vietnam, reaction against conformism and rigid social expectations, and dissatisfaction with blatant racial inequality led young people especially to question the roles assigned to young and old, blacks and whites, women and men. Women's liberation burst onto the scene along with black liberation, gay liberation, and other protest movements, all rebelling against the rules and structures imposed by an essentially patriarchal culture. At the same time, changes in the law implementing legal equality regardless of race, gender, and other factors made it possible for females to move into social roles previously reserved for males. Women became heads of households, blue-collar workers, career professionals, middle managers, business executives, and government officials in increasing numbers. Many of the roles into which they moved increased their social status because of the power these positions offered and because of the salaries they commanded.\(^28\)

Virtually all the major cultures in the world are still patriarchal in structure, but in Western culture and others affected by Western culture women are playing many roles previously available only to men and achieving status open in the past only to men. At the same time, however, it must be admitted that the status that they are acquiring is status as defined by patriarchy. For example, higher-paid work has more prestige than lower-paid work, paid work in general has more prestige than unpaid work, intellectual skill has more prestige than manual labour, and work with adults has more prestige than work with children. Activity that produces immediately tangible benefits is more highly rewarded and has a higher status than that which produces benefits that
are socially important but less immediate or less tangible, such as the education of the young or the preservation of the environment. Moreover, people are respected more for what they do (and especially the wealth they generate) than for who they are, and accomplishments are more esteemed than relationships. Patriarchal values predominate, even though women move into positions formerly filled only by men.

If the patriarchal structure of Western society is less rigid than it was a century ago, it is far from being replaced by a social structure that is truly egalitarian. Men grossly outnumber women in management and executive positions in business and government, men and women tend to enter different professions, with the higher-paid professions dominated by men, and men continue to earn higher salaries for comparable work even in the same profession. This continued inequality is not the only heritage of patriarchy, however, for the privileges extended to males were historically and still are given predominantly to males who are white. The culture of patriarchy therefore manifests itself not only in sexism but also in racism and in every other social structure in which the division of labour is based not on the aptitude of individuals to do certain types of work but on prejudice in favour of one group and against others. Patriarchal bias exists whenever the availability of opportunity is based not on aptitude but on factors that have little or nothing to do with the task to be performed – gender, skin colour, religion, nationality, marital status, sexual preference, and so on – for all these preferences in Western culture have been determined by dominant males.

All this being acknowledged, however, it is still true that Western culture appears to be less severely patriarchal than it was a half-century ago, a century before that, a century before that, and so on. Though patriarchy is far from disappearing, there seems to be a tendency towards a more egalitarian ordering of social opportunity, based not on stereotypes but on abilities. This is not to say that the trend could not be reversed; it is only to say that a trend appears to have begun.29

Sexism in Contemporary Christianity

As was noted at the beginning of this chapter, the existence of gender roles is not necessarily a matter of injustice. In foraging cultures and tribal societies in which sex defines many social roles, the group cannot survive without the contributions of women and men alike. Moreover, very often social roles are defined by factors other than sex (such as fam-
ily of origin and hereditary occupation), and individuals are not able to escape the duty to fill those roles. Injustice arises not from the mere division of labour but from the ability of those with greater power (men, royalty, the wealthy, and so on) to coerce those with less power to do their will without fairly compensating them. Systemic injustice exists when the more powerful can exploit the less powerful in a systematic way that is built into the structures of society and is accepted by oppressors and oppressed alike. The medieval feudal system of landed gentry and landless serfs, the exploitation of miners and factory workers in the industrial revolution, and the use of child labour and migrant workers today are all examples of systemic injustice.

What makes sexism unjust is not the difference in social roles assigned to women and men but the difference in status between those roles and the concomitant difference in power between women and men. (For instance, men may choose to adopt lower-status roles usually assigned to women, such as child rearing, but women cannot enter higher-status positions reserved to men. Thus women are unable to break through the 'glass ceiling' that prevents them from climbing too high on the corporate ladder.) As a result of the difference in status and power, men can oppress and exploit women, receiving from them much more than they are given in return. In this sense, the evil of sexism exists even when it is not recognized as injustice but is accepted as the way things are. In this sense, too, Christianity has been sexist, if not from the time of Jesus, then from the time that leadership in the church became predominantly male.

Sexism in Christianity today shows up primarily in the areas of ministry and marriage. Marriage in Western culture has always been patriarchal and therefore sexist, and patriarchal marriage in Christian culture has from the first century been supported with an ideological interpretation of scripture and nature. Ministry in Christian organizations has, from the second century on, excluded women from leadership positions except vis-à-vis children and other women. Ministry in the sense of service has never been denied to women, as long as their service did not raise their status.

The visibility of sexism in organized religion is heightened today by the relative decline of sexism in secular society. Though Western culture remains patriarchal, most Western countries are ideologically committed to legal equality and opposed to sexual discrimination. Though some Protestant churches share this egalitarian ideology, Catholic, Orthodox, and other Protestant churches (and they comprise the major-
ity in the Christian world) do not. The bulk of organized Christianity is therefore at odds with the stated (if not always lived-out) ideology of contemporary Western culture in the area of sexual justice. Sexism or sexual discrimination is the assignment of gender roles based on reasons that are not related to the different physical capabilities of men and women.\(^{32}\)

Gender roles are unjust when they are not based on gender-related reasons (for example, only women can bear children, and men generally have more upper-body strength than women) but are symbolic expressions of power. In today’s society, there are no tasks that cannot be performed by women as well as men because the tasks of contemporary society are increasingly related to intelligence rather than to musculature. In a factory, for example, a woman can operate a fork lift, and on a dairy farm a woman can install a milking machine. Conversely, a man can do just about any job that has been stereotyped as women’s work, such as nursing and teaching small children. What makes for difference in performance and preference is a variety of factors (such as intelligence, physical size, agility, personality, and training), of which sex may be a factor in some cases (for example, modelling women’s clothing), but not many.

When gender is used as a symbolic expression of power, its application is discriminatory and unjust. That is, when gender (like race, ethnicity, skin colour, religion, political affiliation, or sexual preference) is the basis on which a decision is made regarding an individual in a certain role, then, unless gender is related to the ability to fulfill the role, using it as a basis of judgment is unjustifiable. The deliberate use of gender as a determinant of judgment or selection is nothing less than a naked exercise of power – that is, the power to make decisions based on personal preferences rather than objective reasons. Even the undeliberate or unconscious use of gender in judgment or selection is an unjust exercise of power, only more subtle and concealed. Discrimination against women exists when men are able to do things that women are prevented from doing not by their own limitations but by men.\(^{33}\)

Applying these criteria to issues in marriage and ministry, it becomes clear that sexism based on patriarchal patterns of power still survives in Christianity. Conservative evangelical churches promote the concept of headship in marriage, according to which the husband is the head of the Christian household and the wife is obliged to be submissive to him.\(^{34}\) Even in churches and denominations that do not
espouse the doctrine of headship, however, the cultural pattern of marriage that generally persists among members is some form of patriarchalism, according to which men have rights and privileges (such as not having to do housework in addition to working outside the home) that women do not have. To the extent that these Christian bodies do not actively fight the sexual bias in Western culture, they are in collusion with that culture and tacitly approve of sexism. Finally, some churches, such as the Roman Catholic, subject women to sexual rules regarding birth control and abortion which women have had no hand in drafting and are in no position to revise. These churches institutionalize sexism with regard to marriage because men alone have the power to formulate the doctrines that define marriage and the morals that regulate it.35

Likewise with regard to ministry, sexism is overt in some churches and covert in others. Higher-status ministerial roles have been traditionally reserved for men, so even in those denominations that have adopted policies that allow women equal access to all church positions, the statistical fact is that men still hold the majority of senior positions and the social reality is that women are not often called by congregations to those positions. In addition, some churches bar women from ordination on theological grounds, and so they prevent women both from serving in the ordained ministry and from making church-related decisions that are the prerogative of the ordained clergy.

From the historical and sociological perspective espoused in this volume, it matters little whether the theological arguments supporting the exclusion of women from ordination — or for that matter, proving the headship of husbands over wives — are valid. Arguments are only as sound as their premises, and it is quite logical that conclusions drawn from sexist premises would be equally sexist. Our concern is with the historical records and sociological facts that expose the existence of sexism rather than with its legitimation or delegitimation. We leave the endorsement or criticism of sexism to others.

NOTES


2 On the social construction of gender roles in primitive (foraging) societies,


10 The controlling issue here is paternity — that is, a man's knowledge of his own offspring so that he could pass his family's property to his heirs. If a woman had access to many men, her husband would not know which of her children was his. In the words of Apollodorus of Athens: 'We have courtiers for pleasure, concubines to look after the day-to-day needs of the body, wives that we may breed legitimate children and have a trusty warden of what we have in the house.' Quoted in W.K. Lacy, *The Family in Classical Greece* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1968), 113.


12 See, for example, Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 1993), 65–72; also Edward


23 For example, see Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Mary Collins, eds., *Women – Invisible in Theology and Church* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1985), especially the articles in Part II.


26 See, for example, Karen Anderson, *Wartime Women: Sex Roles, Family Relation*


34 See, for example, John MacArthur, Jr, The Fulfilled Family (Chicago: Moody Press, 1985), chap. 2.