



The Task Force National Religious Leadership Roundtable

ARTICLE OF FAITH

Women's History, Women's Future in Religion

by Mary E. Hunt, Ph.D.

Are women's issues in religion passé? Have we 'been there, done that' when it comes to women in ministry now that the Episcopal Church USA has its first female presiding bishop? Does the exciting discovery of long-forgotten women interpreting the Koran prove that women have always been religious scholars despite their relative rarity in the academy? Women's History Month is a good time to reflect on the ongoing needs of women in religion. I think we are still at the beginning of the road, especially when it comes to lesbians.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Matilda Jocelyn Gage and some of their abolitionist and suffrage colleagues were among the first to recognize that religion is gendered activity. Limits on women in society, they discovered, were often justified by religious ideas bolstered by male images and symbols of the divine. God's will, not simply men's doing, determined society's pecking order. Women, especially women of color, were always on the bottom. Lesbians were all but invisible. Feminists realized that little would change without changing the understanding of the divine. So we did, adding female language and imagery, contesting the all-powerful mode, suggesting divine-human cooperation as an alternative to prevailing creation myths.

In the 20th century, virtually all religions were challenged from the inside out by their women members. Scholarship made clear that women had been marginalized in most traditions. Opening theological and ministerial training to women meant women studied and were ordained in large numbers, now approaching a critical mass in many communities of faith. That work continues apace in most religious groups. Today gatekeepers are more focused on preventing lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people from entering the ranks of the ordained, from being religious on our own terms.

In the 21st century, as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer people begin to be taken seriously in religion, we run the risk of erasing some of the gains made by women as women. Granted we are not sure what a woman is or what a man is anymore as the gender binary goes the way of all flesh. But I detect a certain reticence to look carefully and critically at women's varied experiences. Are they really so similar to men's that they can be subsumed under "lesbian/gay" or "queer"? I think not.

This erasure takes several forms. "Gay" and "lesbian" are lumped together as if they were the same. I sense that many heterosexual and bisexual women have more in common with most lesbian women than lesbian women and gay men have in common. Scholars work on queer theory and now queer theology with few references to how women are differently queer than men. Religion-based LGBT groups tend to default to male assumptions and mores even with lesbians in leadership. It is a vexed problem as I do not want to divide and be conquered, but

neither do I want to assimilate and get lost. Without essentializing women, I think we lose something important in the political and theo-political realms if we pass over women's particularities.

What distinguished women in the 19th century, and still distinguishes most women in the world, is a biology-based prejudice that has structured society unfairly. Such deeply rooted mistakes are not something a society gets over as quickly as Ted Haggard changed his sexual orientation. Sexism lingers in the bibliographies made up of mostly male sources, in the clergy ranks that continue to have far more men than women in positions of power, and in the normative (read: male) understandings of sexuality whether repressive or progressive.

In my experience, lesbians in religion have 'gone along to get along' in a movement that is still nascent and fragile. We have yet to see our experiences and commitments, our faith and beliefs given equal play in religion. I propose that we revisit this question in every denominational statement, every scholarly work and every policy debate. Let us ask if what is at stake is really as vanilla - for everyone - as we think or whether in fact there are distinctive dimensions of the experiences of women, just like those of people of color, that need to be highlighted. Otherwise, we risk the 'disappearing' of women which has characterized many a repressive regime.

Mary E. Hunt, Ph.D. is the Co-Director of Women's Alliance for Theology, Ethics and Ritual (WATER)

Responses from National Religious Leadership Roundtable Members

"Three cheers for Dr. Mary Hunt, who really nails it, as usual! As the woman who is leading Metropolitan Community Churches, which presently has a majority of women on our Board of Elders - our Bishops - we know it is easy to believe, on the surface, that sexism is not 'an issue.'

"The truth is, we deal with gender every day, women in leadership in the church, no matter how queer-friendly the church! We deal with it internally, within our organizations and as we face and confront the wider church and culture. Sometimes the issues are more subtle or buried under an illusion of 'virtual equality.'

"There is no substitute for feminist analysis and practice. Very little conversation about feminism occurs openly in LGBT contexts or organizations anymore, especially in religious ones. It is as if we are 'beyond' that, because we have ordained women or made us part of the 'hierarchy.'"

— **Rev. Nancy Wilson**
Moderator

Metropolitan Community Churches

"Clergy and lay women in church leadership are the canaries in the coal mine. If you hear them singing, it is more likely safe to enter, particularly for persons of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities. If the women are welcome, lesbians and gays might have a chance."

— **Rev. Troy Plummer**
Executive Director

Reconciling Ministries Network, United Methodists

“DignityUSA has long been cognizant of the double oppression faced by lesbian Catholics and bisexual Catholic women. They often experience the misogyny of the Catholic hierarchy, tradition and culture as even more oppressive than the homophobia they also face. While we have made efforts to promote gender equity wherever possible throughout our organization, we recognize that we often do so inadequately, and fail to adequately address the structural barriers that keep women a minority within our movement. During International Women’s History Month, we recommit to these efforts and to being part of creating a world and religious communities where women are truly equal partners with men in all aspects.”

— **Sam Sinnett**
President
DignityUSA

ABOUT THE NATIONAL RELIGIOUS LEADERSHIP ROUNDTABLE

The National Religious Leadership Roundtable (NRLR), convened by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, is an interfaith network of leaders from pro-lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) faith, spiritual and religious organizations. We work in partnership with other groups to promote understanding of and respect for LGBT people within society at large and in communities of faith. We promote understanding and respect within LGBT communities for a variety of faith paths and for religious liberty, and to achieve commonly held goals that promote equality, spirituality and justice.

The mission of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force is to build the political power of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community from the ground up. We do this by training activists, organizing broad-based campaigns to defeat anti-LGBT referenda and advance pro-LGBT legislation, and by building the organizational capacity of our movement. Our Policy Institute, the movement's premier think tank, provides research and policy analysis to support the struggle for complete equality and to counter right-wing lies. As part of a broader social justice movement, we work to create a nation that respects the diversity of human expression and identity and creates opportunity for all. Headquartered in Washington, D.C., we also have offices in New York City, Los Angeles, Miami, Minneapolis and Cambridge. The Task Force is a 501(c)(3) corporation incorporated in Washington, D.C. Contributions to the Task Force are tax-deductible to the full extent allowed by law. (C) 2007 National Gay and Lesbian Task Force . 1325 Massachusetts Ave NW, Suite 600, Washington, DC 20005. Phone 202.393.5177. Fax 202.393.2241. TTY 202.393.2284. theTaskForce@theTaskForce.org.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION:

Pedro Julio Serrano, Communications Coordinator
(Office) 646.358.1479
(Cell) 787.602.5954
pjserrano@theTaskForce.org