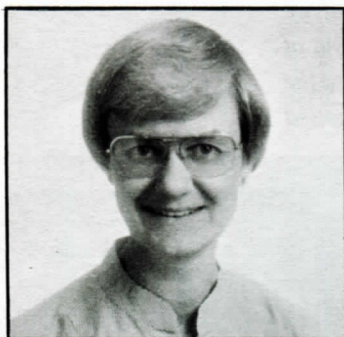


A Century Later: Women And The Church

by Helen Graham, M.M.



Sr. Helen Graham

**'I do not believe
that any man
ever saw or talked
with God...'
Elizabeth Cady Stanton**

'The canon law, the Scriptures, the creeds and codes and church discipline of the leading religions bear the impress of fallible man, and not of our ideal first cause, "the Spirit o' all Good," that set the universe of matter and mind in motion, and by immutable law holds the land, the sea, the planets, revolving round the great centre of light and heat, each in its own elliptic, with millions of stars in harmony all singing together, the glory of creation forever and ever.' Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1895)1.

'I ask no favors for my sex. All I ask our brethren is, that they will take their feet from off our necks....' Sarah Grimké (1838)2.

Aside from being the year of the Fourth UN Conference on Women in Beijing, 1995 is also the centenary commemoration of **The Woman's Bible**, a project initiated by *Elizabeth Cady Stanton* as a result of her experience in the nineteenth century anti-

slavery and women's suffrage movements in the United States. *Cady Stanton* was active at the first Women's Rights Convention held in New York in 1848. In the **Declaration of Sentiments**, which she wrote for the convention, she stated that the history of humankind is "a history of repeated injuries and usurpations on the part of man toward woman, having [as] its direct object the

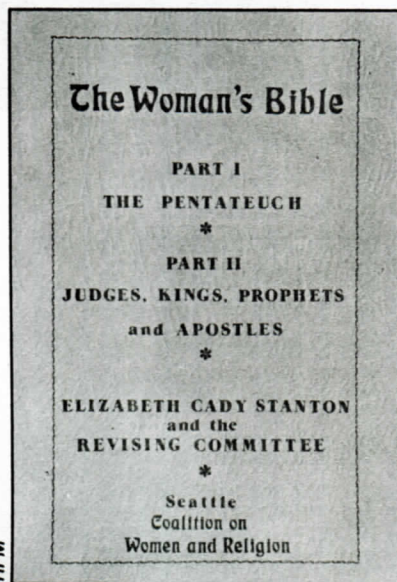
establishment of an absolute tyranny over her."3.

It was because she found that anti-women texts of church law and legislation and the Bible were being quoted by clergymen, statesmen, lawyers, and the press, and were even being internationalized by women, that *Cady Stanton* proposed to a committee of women that they take a deeper look at women's position in the Testaments. "If the Bible teaches the equality of Woman," she wrote, "why does the church refuse to ordain women to preach the gospel, to fill the offices of deacons and elders, and to administer the Sacraments, or to admit them as delegates to the Synods, General Assemblies and Conferences of the different denominations?"4.

In her introduction to **The Woman's Bible**, *Cady Stanton* offered a brief summary of the Bible's position on woman:

*"The Bible teaches that woman brought sin and death into the world, that she precipitated the fall of the race, that she was arraigned before the judgment seat of Heaven, tried, condemned and sentenced. Marriage for her was to be a condition of bondage, maternity a period of suffering and anguish, and in silence and subjection, she was to play the role of a dependent on man's bounty for all her material wants, and for all the information she might desire on the vital questions of the hour, she was commanded to ask her husband at home."*5.

Not unexpectedly, along with some appreciation and encouragement, she



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experienced strong opposition to her project. Even the Woman's Rights movement disavowed the book.⁶ *Cady Stanton* was not, however, the first woman to have serious problems with the biblical texts. In her book, **The Creation of Feminist Consciousness**, the feminist historian *Gerda Lerner* has documented the persistent efforts on the part of women over many centuries, to counter prevailing interpretations of core biblical texts by patriarchal authorities who used them to define, what they considered to be, the proper roles for women in society and to justify women's subordination.

A major cause of the growing constriction of women's functions in the Christian church, which began in the second century and continues on into our present time, was the adoption of a dualistic anthropology, which divided reality into two separate and opposing halves, assigning a higher value to one member of the pair, i.e., humanity/nature, man/woman, and God/world. This hierarchical dualism, first articulated in ancient Greek philosophy, was raised to the level of divinely revealed truth in church teaching down through the ages. Isolated women throughout the centuries have been uneasy with this pattern of distortion, but were not yet able to clearly articulate an alternative vision until the second half of this century. The project of *Elizabeth Cady Stanton* was a significant forerunner of contemporary feminism among church women (and some men).

The commemoration of the one hundredth anniversary of the publication of **The Woman's Bible**, therefore, affords us an occasion to reflect on and assess the journey of women to achieve their rightful place in the churches in the last one hundred years. While it is true that women are ordained in some Protestant confessions, including, most recently, the women ordained to the priesthood in the Anglican communion, women are still very far from achieving equality in the churches. It was only half a century ago that women of the Roman Catholic communion in the United States gained access to formal theological education. In 1943 Holy Cross

Sister Madeleva Wolff inaugurated the first doctoral program in theology for women at Saint Mary's College, Notre Dame, Indiana. Nine years later, in 1952, *Pope Pius XII* authorized women to receive degrees in theology.

The issue of women's ordination to the priesthood has been a major issue for women in the Roman Catholic church since the early 1970s. Rome responded to women's demands in 1976 with a document reiterating the argument that it was not church practice to ordain women, and

added that since the priest acts 'in the person of Christ' women cannot be sacramental signs of Christ since they are not men.⁷ With this additional (offensive and theologically dubious) element in the argument, it became clear that the real issue is not ordination, or priesthood, but a much more fundamental question: Are women indeed created in the image and likeness of God as the Bible says (Genesis 1:27)? Or are women predestined by their physiology to be forever incapable of representing Christ? These are deeply theological questions.

More recently women (and men) have been 'definitely' barred from even discussing the possibility of women's ordination by the apostolic letter *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, in which "in order that all doubt may be removed," *Pope John Paul II* declared "that the church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women and that this judgment is to be definitely held by all the church's faithful."⁸



MRS. ELIZABETH CADY STANTON.
Honorary President of National-American Woman Suffrage Association.
Elizabeth Cady Stanton


As one woman has commented, the papal letter can be viewed:

*“as an indicator that the Vatican is threatened by women’s leadership in the church. Intransigence on this issue is part of the institutional church’s pattern of intransigence on all major sexual issues. It is an indication that at the highest level of international church leadership the full humanity of women is still not taken seriously.”*9.

Again, it is clear that the real issue is not ordination but the recognition of women’s full humanity.

(and Jewish)11 women (and men) around the globe who will not abandon the struggle until women take their rightful place in church (synagogue) and society.

Endnotes

1. Elizabeth Cady Stanton in the 'Introduction' to *The Woman's Bible* (Ed. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, New York, European Publishing Company, 1895, 12,13.
2. Sarah Moore Grimke, *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes and the Condition of Women, Addressed to Mary Parker, President of the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society*, Boston, Isaac Knapp, 1838, 10, as cited by Lerner, *ibid*, 162.
3. 'Editor's Preface' to *The Woman's Bible*, vi.
4. *ibid*, 9.
5. *ibid*.
6. See Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness*, New York/Oxford, Oxford University press, 1993, 164.
7. See Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith declaration *Inter Insigniores* on the question of the admission of women to the ministerial priesthood, Oct. 15, 1976: AAS 69, 1977, 98-116.
8. *Catholic New Times*, 26 June 1994, 8. The complete text is also available in *The National Catholic Reporter*, June 17, 1994, 7. The letter was issued on May 22, 1994.
9. Carolyn Osiek, RSCJ in the *National Catholic Reporter*, June 17, 1994, 5.
10. The devaluation of women on the basis of gender finds its biblical support in such passages as 1 Cor 11:3-10, 14:33b-36; Eph 5:22-6:9; and 1 Tim 2:8-15 among others.
11. While the concern of this brief article is with women in the Christian churches, it is interesting to observe that there is a parallel movement among Jewish women, and that there are even stirrings among Muslim women as well. See for example, Jewish feminist Judith Plaskow's *Standing Again At Sinai: Judaism From a Feminist Perspective*, San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1990; *Sisters in Islam, Are Women & Men Equal Before Allah? and Are Muslim Men Allowed to Beat Their Wives?* Malaysia: United Selangor Press Sdn Bhd, 1991; and, Riffat Hassan, 'Muslim Women and Post-Patriarchal Islam', in *After Patriarchy: Feminist Transformations of the World Religions*, ed. Paula M. Cooley, William R. Eakin and Jay B. McDaniel, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991, 39-64. 

Arguments Used Against The Ordination of Women

by *Dulcie Abraham*

This is an excerpt from an article by *Dulcie Abraham* on women and priesthood in the Anglican church in Malaysia.

Traditional arguments against women becoming priests

Basically there are three main identifiable levels or planes of argument against the ordination of women which continue to be given prominence.

At the **first level** are what are regarded as theological and scriptural arguments against including women in the priesthood. One such perspective is that of Christ as the 'icon' of God as essentially a male 'imageo dei'. Only a male therefore, according to this argument, can truly represent Christ as a priest. It is for this reason it is argued, Christ chose only male apostles. This, by and large, is the Roman Catholic and Anglo Catholic stance. The more fundamentalistic viewpoint is that the case against women priests is scriptural. And those passages in the Epistles which apparently pronounce against women teaching in Church or teaching men etc. are quoted to support this view.

There has been opposition from a strong minority on grounds that the ordination of women will divide the Anglican Communion. There are in fact bishops and clergy actively campaigning for such division because of their belief, conscience or principles.



Lynn Lee

In the one hundred years since *The Woman's Bible*, a vast number of Jewish, Catholic and Protestant women have completed doctoral studies in Theology and Scripture, and are contributing significantly to raising the consciousness of women (and men) on the issue of the marginalization and subordination of women in the churches and in society. The long history in the church of the devaluation of women on the basis of their gender will not be easily overcome¹⁰, but there is hope in the growing awareness of Christian



Lynn Lee