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Religion and the Limits of Women's Religious Role Identity *(pp. 60-70)*

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Abstract: The paper examines religion and the limits of women's religious role identity. In every belief system, women are more religiously active than men. Paradoxically, despite their high degree of religiosity, they are relegated to marginal positions in all major religions. The paper maintains that the subordination of women religious status and role is justified and legitimized through patriarchy built in theological mythology. However, women no longer accept the status quo as God given rather they challenge the patriarchal underpinnings of religious traditions. This agitation, no doubt, has yielded positive results as women are now ordained priests and bishops in some religion and many others play the role of Founder, Seers and Prophetesses. The paper recommends that women should not relent in the struggle to erase the subordination and devaluation of women religious role. It is only through that process that they will regain their pride of place in religious and other activities in society.

Key words: religion, women, role identity, patriarchy, role subordination.

1 INTRODUCTION

Human beings are from time to time confronted with certain life experiences which pose real challenges to their existential realities. In this connection, incidents such as birth, death, dream, ghost, inequalities, e.t.c., readily come to mind. In other to come out of the perplexing condition created by the incident, religion comes to mind. In offering ready explanations Religion comes handy, whenever the reason of man or woman fail to satisfactorily offer a logical cum objective solution to the experience and challenges of life. In other words, religion is socially fabricated by man to provide answer to the ultimate but perplexing challenges of life.

Whatever exists today as religion is a process designed by man to relate with supernatural beings which are ordinarily beyond his sense perception but which; nevertheless, he considers to be important for his survival both in the phenomenal world and his eventual state in the spiritual realm. Religion usually come into the life of man when a particular personality suddenly receives an influx of spiritual energy which is ordinarily described as contact with the supernatural, which uplifts him from the rest of humanity to a social pedestal which enables him penetrate the veil of material existence and express truth which he considers as messages from the supernatural.

The truth or spiritual principles which had been revealed to a particular personality are usually done in varied versions to some other personalities who had also attained similar level of spiritual purification and maturity. The believers in each of these different versions

of spiritual principles, worship, venerate, the truth through different religions which they set up in most cases after the transition of the personality who rendered the truth to humanity. Society thus is faced with a situation of one set of spiritual principle that is expressed through different religion. Hence we have for instance, African Traditional religion, Christianity and Islamic religion and a host of other religious organisations in society.

In each of these numerous religions, there exists religious organization with defined system of authority. Human beings as members play several roles. These roles find expression in leadership and engagement in ritual activities. Sometimes too, doctrinal principles are observed. Virtually, in all the religious hierarchies as in other areas of social life, these statuses and roles are skewed in disfavor of women. They are excluded from power and restricted from engaging in certain religious rituals. This religious exclusion and restriction place a border limit on feminine role identity and this constitute the main thrust of this paper.

2 THE CONCEPT OF RELIGION AND GENDER ROLE IDENTITY

Religion is an aspect of culture that borders on supernaturalism and consists of systems of belief, thought and action that characterized human society be it traditional or modern. Religious beliefs of one sort or another are present in every known society, but their variety seems endless. The diversity and complexity of religion poses the problem of definitional controversy. As a way out of the problem, sociologists provide definitions that borders on functional and substantive components of religion.

The functional definition lay emphasis on the role that religion plays for individuals or society. Along this line of reasoning, religion is defined as a system of beliefs and practices by means of which a group of people struggle with the ultimate problems of life (Hamilton 1995, Wallace 1995, McGuire2002). From a substantive perspective, Durkheim (1921 and 2001) respectively defines religion as a system of beliefs and practices based on the sacred or supernatural realm that guides human behaviour, gives meaning to life and unites believers into a single moral community known as a church.

Religion therefore is a socially fabricated medium through which the questions of ultimate challenges in life are answered. In providing answers to perplexing situation, religion gives no room to logical demonstration. It is faith that predominates and whatever that is accepted on faith is unquestionable for it is sacred, inviolable and seen as factual and real. This is aptly captured by Clifford Geertz when he said:

> *Religion is a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive and long lasting moods and motivation in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and*

motivation seem uniquely realistic (Geertz 1974).

From the above, religion is anchored on supernaturalism. This implies a dichotomy of ideas on that which is natural and that which is more than natural, indeed superior to the natural. The difference between the two is dependent on a people's general philosophy as to the nature of things and their basic existential postulates. Thus, the existence of bafflement, pain and moral paradox of the problem of meaning is one of the things that drive and motivate human beings towards belief in gods, devils, spirits totemic principles and their spiritual efficacy.

3 GENDER ROLE IDENTITY

The concept of gender role identity will be appreciated the more if an attempt is made to bring the difference between sex and gender. Sex is biological and anatomical characteristics that distinguish male and female with the primary and secondary characteristics therein (Golden 1992, Lips 1993, Lott 1994). Gender on the other hand, refers to socially or culturally constructed differences between male and female that is embedded in meanings, belief and practices associated with masculinity and femininity. (Gouley 1999 and Lorber 2004). Gender differences, as human invention, organizes social life in culturally patterned way, hence the gender role differentiation in religious activities.
Gender role identity is the cluster of social expectations deemed appropriate for status holder. An individual's gender role either as a female or male are assigned by the group or society that the individual belongs and is generally understood to be an ascribed characteristic (Chafetz, 1974). The role of men and women and the gender definitions of their behavior as masculine and feminine are social constructions rather than biological given. These roles and definitions are established by society and learned by individuals through socialization beginning at infancy.

It is a fundamental sociological truism that all roles including gender roles are never static. They are continuously revised to meet, the changing individual and societal needs (Banton 1978). The role of women like that of men has been undergoing exactly such changes. There is no longer any doubt, that there is presently moving through our society, a vigorous, determined and ideologically informed assault on the traditional religious gender roles of the woman (David and Brannon 1984). Women are made to subordinate their gender role to the more generalized and pervasive demands of their religious status. However, this has sparked off resistance on the part of women in recent time. This is necessitated by the bid for the woman to consciously regain her lost religious gender role identity.

4 WOMEN AND RELIGIOUS GENDER ROLE IN THE BEGINNING

In virtually all societies, religion started from animism-the belief in spirit. From animism, religion evolved to theism-the belief in god. Polytheism-the belief in the existence of many gods predominated society till monotheism-the belief in a single god was invented. However, it should be noted that the seemingly dominance of monotheism, animism and

polytheism are still evident characteristics of the belief system in most societies. In early history, especially, in animism and polytheism women were considered central to the spiritual quest in society. In Africa, Middle East, Asia and Europe, Archaeologists have discovered numerous symbols of the Great Mother Goddess. She was pictured as a naked pregnant woman that symbolized the mysteries of fertility and life. This is succinctly captured by Karen Armstrong:

> *The earth produced plants and nourished them in rather the same way as a woman gave birth to a child and fed it from her own body. The marginal power of the earth seemed vitally interconnected with the mysterious creativity of the female sex (Armstrong 1993)*

Then in societies too, there were very few effigies of gods as men. Even as societies developed many gods and goddesses, the Mother Goddess still play a crucial role in the pantheons of deities and remained a powerful figure. In religious rituals, women ritual roles were central and indispensable to community cohesion and well being. In some societies men and women have ritual roles that are closed to the other and they sometimes exchange ideas on religious rituals. (Bell, 1985, Richman, 1987, Morsy, 1999). Women in this period serve as priest of varying capacities.

5 THE ORIGIN OF WOMEN RELIGIOUS ROLE SUBORDINATION

The pride of place that the women enjoyed as regard her religious role identity began to decline with time. A male oriented mythology which replaced the Goddess with a more powerful masculine deity was fabricated in most societies. In traditional religions, the roles that were played by the women were not only taken away but also they were restricted from worship or observing some rituals. In societies, where women are allowed to play religious roles, these roles are regarded as unimportant and marginal to the central religious roles of men (Briggs 1981 and Laderman 1990).

In African traditional religion for instance, not only are women denied priesthood of important deities in society, religious symbolism sometimes depicts them as evil or having negative spiritual forces. Upon this religious symbolism, they are not allowed to go near places of high religious importance. Among the Urhobos of Nigeria, women are not allowed to enter certain town halls where important community deities are symbolically represented. They are also restricted from passing through certain bush paths or waterways that are regarded as sacred. The reason for this restriction among other is the defying potency of women during menstruation and early pregnancy.

The final death knell of the Goddesses and their religious relevance came with the invention and acceptance of monotheism-the belief in a single god that is embraced by Muslims and Christians. In Islamic religion, the women's religious role identity is not intact. No matter how influential a woman may appear, she cannot occupy any religious

position of authority. Just as it is in the African Traditional Religion (ATR), women are highly restricted. For instance, the woman in her menstruation is not allowed to pray, touch the holy Koran, or to enter a mosque for worship.

In Christianity, the subordination of women religious role identity is built in biblical mythology surrounding the creature of woman. This is clearly presented thus:

> *.. then the Lord God took some soil and formed a man out of it. .....he placed man in the garden of Eden to cultivate and guard it… then the Lord God said, it is not good for a man to live alone. I will make him a suitable companion to help him… He made man to fall in deep sleep and he took out one of the ribs of Adam and form a woman out of the rib… For eating the forbidden fruit… I will increase your trouble in pregnancy and your pain in giving birth…. In spite of this, you will still have desire for your husband yet you will be subject to him...(Genesis 2:7-12, 3:16).*

The assertion above represents a mythological origin and justification for the subordinate status and role of the woman that is evident in christianity. It is in line with this, that Millette (1997) argues that religion is used in legitimizing the subordinate religious and other roles of women in society. She asserts that the Christian religion portrays Eve as not being in God's original plan of creature. Rather, the creation of Eve was an after-thought and to make matter worse she was created from the spare rib of Adam. In a similar vein, Procter-Smith aptly asserts thus:

> *Can christians speak of God the creator and God the saviour in any term but male. I believe in God the father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth and in Jesus Christ his only son "Glory be to the father and to the son and to the Holy Ghost…. (Procter-Smith 1997).*

The assertions are phrases recited or sung by generations of christians. This makes it clear that the traditional emphasis of Christianity rests on a male God and his divine male son. Centuries of christian doctrines, rituals, prayers and songs have repeatedly reflected the father-son imagery so thoroughly that it is difficult for many to imagine christianity using another imagery that appears otherwise. This implies that christianity is a resolutely male affair in its symbolism and hierarchy. For instance, while Mary, the mother of Jesus is sometimes treated as if she had divine qualities, God is the father, a male figure and Jesus took the human shape of a man.

This male affair in religion and christianity in particular informed the restrictions that women suffer as regard their religious role identity. The biblical verses as recorded in first Corinthians and first Timothy serve as a pointer:

> *As in all the churches of God's people the woman should keep quiet in the meetings. They are not allowed to speak… if they want to find out about something, they should ask their husband at home. It is a disgraceful thing for a woman to speak in church… (1 Corinth 14:33-35). Women should learn in silence and all humility. I do not allow them to teach or to have authority over men… they must keep quiet…for Adam was created first and then Eve. And it was not Adam who was deceived. It was the woman who was deceived and broke God's law (1st Timothy 2:11-14).*

The above reveals the extent to which religion has reduced the womenfolk. They are so devalued that they can't even ask questions. The devaluation and attendant subordination is traced to the creation of woman, her encounter with Satan and eventual fall of man in the garden of Eden. If this account is anything to go by, then the subordination of women in religion is nothing but punishment by men for disobedience after God had punished Eve. However, this account does not explain why non christian women are devalued and stripped of their religious role identity.

In assuming position of religious authority, women are deprived from occupying certain positions. Women in the catholic faith are not allowed into priesthood or even to be the head of laity. Even when they occupy statuses play roles that are similar, the status and role of the women are rated low and sometimes derogatory. We appreciate this more, when we attempt a comparism of the status and role of the catholic reverend fathers and reverend sisters.

The reverend father is superior to the reverend sister in authority. The major roles of the reverend father are sacred and grounded in the sacraments, while that of the reverend sister are not. The reverend father can own property and have private money. The reverend father can drink , smoke and go out alone, he can exercise independence, freedom of choice and individuality while the sister is passive, subordinate, submissive, collectively oriented, nurturant, quite child like, obedient e.t.c. The reverend father is entitled to separate accommodation, the sisters are always in the convent. This becomes more disturbing when viewed against the background that both the father and sister are subjected to the religious principle of celibacy and other deprivation in the secular world.

5 RESISTANCE AND THE RESURGENCE OF WOMEN'S RELIGIOUS ROLE IDENTITY

The subordination of the woman religious role has been vigorously resisted in some societies. Women have made frantic efforts to reduce the imbalance between men and women in status and role occupied and played within religion. The first form of resistance was far back 1774 in New York by a christian sect known as the Shakers. The Shakers were headed by Ann Lee- a prophetess from Manchester in England (Andrew 1953, Mercadante 1992). The Shakers were critical of the male centeredness in religion. In other to reverse the trend, they resorted to using female language by referring to God as a mother and the Prophetess Ann Lee as the second coming of Jesus Christ in a female form. (Paterson 1989, Sasson 1993).In 1870, Elizabeth Candy Stanton, an American campaigner for the rights of women also questioned the subordination of women in christianity. In her view:

> *The deity had created women and men as being equal value and the bible should fully reflect this fact….its masculinist character reflected not the words of God but the fact that the Bible was written by men. There was no reason to suppose that God is a man since it was clear in the scripture that all human beings were fashioned in the image of God (Doely 1978:9).*

As a manifestation of her resistance, in the face of virulent reaction from Church authorities, she organized a twenty three Women's Revising Committee to advise her in preparing the Woman Bible which was eventually published in 1895 (Giddens, 2006).
In the mid 50s, women have again rose to the challenge. Feminists such as Simone de Beauvoir, Nawal El-Saadawi, Jean Holm among others attacked the devaluation and subordination of women within religions. The feminists, as de Beauvoir aptly asserts:

> *Men generally exercised control over religious beliefs man enjoys the great advantage of having a God endorse the code he writes…the code uses divine authority to support male dominance. For the Jews, Mohammedans and Christians among others, man is master by divine right. The church is notably hostile to all measures likely to help in women's emancipation…. There must be a religion for women….. (de Beauvoir 1953).*

Hageman (1974) El Saadawi, (1980) and Holm (1994) lend credence to the above assertion. To El Saadawi, religion became patriarchal and oppressive to women through the misinterpretation of religious beliefs by men and this had added a new load to their already

heavy chains. According to her, the only way out of these chains is for the women to struggle for their liberation.

The resistance and agitation for a change in the status quo began to yield positive results. It started first in the Church of England largely dominated by men between 1987 and 1992, women were allowed to be deaconesses but not permitted to be priests. Although, they were part of the laity, they were not allowed to conduct certain basic religious rituals like pronouncing blessings or solemnizing marriages.

As an outcome intensified pressure particularly from the women inside the Church of England, the Synod (a Governing Assembly of the Church) voted to make the priesthood open to women. Thus, in 1992 women were ordained priests. From that time till date, there are over twenty ordained women priests in 2005, the Church of England voted to begin the process of allowing women to be ordained bishops. However, many conservatives in the Church interpreted the full acceptance of women as a blasphemous deviation from the biblical truth. However, the decision to ordain was left at the discretion of each province. To this effect, the United States of America ordained Rev. Barbara Harris as the first female bishop in the world.

This change is not restricted to the Church of England in other part of the women play different role either as founders or leaders in christianity. The Apostolic Faith in USA was founded by Florence Crawford. Semple Macpherson founded the Four Square Gospel Church and Ellen White was the founder of the Seventh Day Adventist Church. (Jaja, 2003). All these churches are biblically based, have ordained female pastors and are recognized and appreciated internationally. The resurgence of leadership role for women in christendom is also evident in Nigeria. Lady Evangelist Eunice Osagede, Damilola Ashin are founders of Jesus Women Fellowship and Body in Christ respectively. Also in Celestial Church of Christ, Cherubim and Seraphim, Aladura Churches e.t.c women play vital religious roles as founders, seers and prophetesses. In the Pentecostal denominations, women are ordained priest and they grow through the rank as their male counterparts. That explains why the prefix-Rev and Rev Mrs. or Pastor and Pastor Mrs. are prevalent in most christian dominated societies. The Christ's Faith Mission has produced Mrs. Benson Idahosa as the first female bishop in Nigeria and second in the world.

In the face of this alteration in the religious role of women across the globe, the Catholic Church is to yet to experience it. The call for the ordination of women has been constantly turned down by the Catholic Authorities. In 1977, the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in Rome formally declared that women were not admissible to the catholic priesthood. The reason for this was that Jesus did not call woman to be one of his disciples. In 2004, seven women ordained as priests by Romulo Antonio Braschi, an Argentine rebel Bishop were excommunicated from the church and their ordination was overturned by the pope (Vatican 2004).

It is unworthy to mention that, in spite of the conservative posture, some catholic priests argue in favour of women. For instance Rev. Fr. Wijinguard argued thus:

> *the exclusion of women religious role is a clear form of ecclesiastical discrimination. It was the social custom of his time that compelled Jesus to select only men as his disciples during his life time despite his special concern and compassion for women……. If Christ were to live in a society like ours he would have chosen women as his followers. Christ did not establish a rule against a woman becoming priest (Nnoruga 2009).*

As an outcome of the above line of reasoning, women in Catholic Church are now allowed to play the role of lay readers, teachers of religious doctrine and as catechists. The Vatican Council recommended the restoration of permanent deaconate that will be vested with the powers to baptize, preach and also administer the Eucharist.

6 CONCLUSIONS

The discourse apparently reveals that in the era of animism and polytheism, women had their place of pride as regards their religious role identity. Women were central in spiritual issues and religious symbols depicted women. Thus, the mother Goddess was believed to play vital role in the pantheons of deities and remained a powerful figure in many societies in Africa and beyond.

The religious role identity of the women began to dwindle along the line. A male oriented mythology which replaced the goddess with a more powerful deity represented by man emerged. Consequently, the role women play in the various belief systems was not only taken away but they were also restricted from touching object or places of religious importance. Some of the roles women are allowed to play are regarded as unimportant and marginal to the central religious role of men.

The devaluation and subordination of the women's religious role by men in society, though, had a mythological origin and justification was vehemently resisted by few feminists. The role played by the likes of Ann Lee, Elizabeth Candy Stanton, Nawal El Saadawi and a host of others has reduced the subordination of the women in religious activities. Women now occupy position of authority and play vital roles in most religion. However, women should intensify the fight so that they can gain more from their lost religious role identity.

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