

Introduction

The writings of St Paul with respect to the role of women in religious life are well known: he would have them keep their silence and their heads covered. St John Chrysostom held women in low regard referring to them as “merely a whitened sepulchre”. His contemporary, St Augustine, observed, “By the sex of her body she, woman kind, is submissive to the masculine sex.” Things did not improve over the centuries with the verse, “For we courtiers learn at school, only with our sex to fool. Y’re not worth the serious part.” “The Great Cham” himself, Doctor Johnson, remarked, “Sir, a woman preaching is like a dog walking on his hinder legs. It is not done well, but you are surprised to see it done at all.” The nineteenth-century Tractarian clergyman, Edward Pusey, stated that “The female character expands but in the shade.” In the Anglican Church of today there are a number of adherents who object to the ordination of women as priests, and very much so to episcopal office. In both the Roman Catholic and Orthodox communions the idea of women in anything but a very limited role is totally rejected by officialdom.

Despite these animadversions, there were deviating voices from the earliest days of the Christian church. Maximilla, a Montanist, having personally received the Holy Spirit was to prophesy disasters following her demise, saying, “After me there will be no further prophets, only the end”. By “the end” she meant the immediate Second Coming. Priscilla, whose religious views were not dissimilar, was also a prophetess who “spoke in tongues”, glossolalia, and was a convinced millenarian. These Montanist views were condemned by the orthodox, and their adherents branded as heretics. The mediaeval church had those, who in one way or another, challenged the assumptions of St Paul; these women were not rebels, but rather re-inventing the female role. Saints such as Bridget of Sweden and Catherine of Siena had a real influence on church life. Later St Teresa of Avila must have been a great trial to her ecclesiastical supervisions as she junketed about Spain with her entourage and dragged poor St John of the Cross in her wake as she established various Discalced Carmelite communities.

Two sixteenth-century English women, Anne Askew and Joan Boucher, were dissidents. The former held decidedly heretical views on

the sacrament, and asserted them publicly. She was to be burned at the stake in 1546. Her contemporary, Joan Boucher, distributed copies of Tyndale's translation of the New Testament, rejected by the orthodox, to ladies of the court. She, too, was burned at the stake in 1550 for holding what were essentially docetic opinions.

Antoinette Bourignon founded an orphanage in the mid-seventeenth century, where the children were taught to believe they were truly "imps of Satan" being possessed by devils. She preached a curious mélange of Jansenist and Pelagian ideas, which made her unpopular with both Protestants and Catholics in her native Belgium. Her French near-contemporary, Angélique Arnaud, who was also French, and a notorious Jansenist, had grave reservations about the virtues attributed to the masculine sex – in particular with respect to monks and priests. She did not hesitate in making these opinions known. Her views on royal personages were equally unflattering. She said, for example, of princesses that few could be found in which the spirit and grace of God were evident. It is hardly surprising that King Louis XIV found this descendant of a Cathar family not to his liking.

Anne Hutchinson fell foul of the authorities in the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1637 for advocating antinomianism, and was expelled to Rhode Island. Her enemies rightly felt that she had received her just desserts when she was killed by Indians a few years later. Another North American, Jemima Wilkinson, claimed to have died in 1776, and returned with a new body as an incarnation of Christ. She dressed in semi-masculine costume, and asserted her ability to perform miracles. She claimed to emulate Christ in being able to walk on water, her followers seem to have believed this implicitly but she appears never to have been put to the test.

While in general John Wesley did not favour women preachers, it seems that on occasion his sister Patty Wesley and also Sarah Crosly did deliver the occasional sermon. On the other hand, William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army, encouraged his wife, Catherine Booth, to preach the gospel. Indeed, a Salvation Army placard advertised her activities with the words, "Come and hear a woman preach!"

More eccentric perhaps were the Fox sisters who were spiritualists, and who claimed to be able to communicate with the dead. Traditional Christian denominations were hostile to such assertions. Annie Besant, one-time atheist and later a leading figure in the Theosophical Society, was to promote Jiddu Krishnamurti as almost a semi-divine world teacher. Perhaps equally curious was the career of Alexandra David Neel, a sometime French opera singer, who travelled to India, visited Tibet and wrote on Tibetan Buddhism. She was in later life to establish a centre in France which became a sort of lamasary.

It is obvious, therefore, that deviating voices, one might almost say dissenting voices, are infinitely varied. The women critics who, for example, remained members of the Roman Catholic Church were not silenced by traditional authority. They were essentially reformers not revolutionaries, but rejected the orthodoxy of the world of which they were a part, and they were prepared to risk persecution, and in some instances death to advance their opinions. There were those also who were convinced it was their destiny to lead society to a better set of beliefs that would ensure their earthly happiness and their ultimate salvation. All of them, one way and another, had a vision, some literally, others only in the generic sense of the word. To succeed they could have no doubts as to the rightness of their mission. It is obvious that had they been men their ideas might well have found more support and their activities greater approbation. Religious life has since the start of the Christian era been dominated by men, who made the rules and determined what was acceptable. They often regarded women who might in some fashion challenge the establishment with very real hostility.

One deviating voice, that of the unworldly Joanna Southcott, might well symbolise what all of these women were attempted to accomplish. She said, "This is a New thing Amongst mankind for a woman to be the Greatest Prophet that ever came into the world, to bring man out of darkness into thy Marvellous light and make every Crooked path straight before You, and bring every mountain to a plain, and all dark sayings shall be brought into Light."