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Sri Lankan Ordained Women's Experience and Asian Feminist Theologizing

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I am here under the auspices of the Christian Conference of Asia's Ecumenical Lecture Series program in partnership with Theological College of Lanka in Kandy, Sri Lanka. This program gives CCA the opportunity to reach out to the people on the grassroots level and to distant places. Hope S. Antone (CCA's joint executive secretary for Faith, Mission and Unity) rightly observed that while ecumenical movements and some non-government organizations have gone far in their journey of reflections and action towards the fullness of life, the seminaries and churches are very often lagging behind. It is because the churches and seminaries are "stuck in their denominational identity-searching and structure-maintaining tendencies."² Thus, the Ecumenical Lecture Series program is conceived by CCA as one way of addressing the above-mentioned situation. This program seeks to encourage ecumenical thinking and commitment towards cooperative efforts among the peoples in Asia. Consequently, CCA brings together people from the grassroots level, from seminaries, and ecumenical movements to wrestle together with issues that affect life.

This gathering to celebrate theological education for women in Sri Lanka is one venue where we can look back and reflect on the journey of Sri Lankan women involved in theological education.

Linking my Story with your Story

Asian feminist theologians consider storytelling as an important aspect of doing theology. It values women's experiences as a logical starting point in theologizing. Telling one's story brings into the theological discourse the categories of gender, social location, context, culture, and ethnicity. I get to know better the struggles of women in Sri Lanka by listening to their stories, your stories. Thus, I can link my own story with yours.

I am a lay theologian from the Philippines. I spent more than a decade working with the urban poor women and children in Dumaguete City before I joined the faculty of the Divinity School in Silliman University as Christian Education instructor. In the first faculty meeting that I attended, one item in the agenda was the search for a person for faculty development in the area of church history. The names mentioned were all men, so I suggested a woman's name. The immediate reaction of my colleagues, who were my former

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² Hope Antone, "Editorial", *CTC Bulletin* 21, no. 3 (2005): 1.

professors, was negative. As church history is under the department of theology, one white professor said: "Theology is not for women. It is a difficult field. Christian Education is the right field for women." All the other male professors nodded their heads, while my two female colleagues just looked at each other in silence. One of these professors is remembered by women in our church conference to be the one who questioned the move to nominate a woman to the top position in the conference. He protested: "What can women do anyway?" My former student reported that she answered the professor with a question: "Your wife heads (a government agency) in the city. Do you mean she is not doing anything there?"

I also observed this sexist attitude among the Asian theological circle. In one meeting of the Congress of Asian Theologians in Chiang Mai, the man who served as moderator in one session was tasked to introduce the two panelists. He stood up and spent so much time in introducing and giving his hallelujahs to the male speaker. When it was time to introduce the female speaker, he sat down and told the female speaker to introduce herself! That was a glaring discrimination of women.

Discrimination and violence against women come in various forms and levels. In the church, some of these forms are embedded in the institutional church's constitutions and by-laws that seek to "put them (the women) in their place," as the saying goes. Ordination is an area where some women wage the struggle for equality. Generally, ordination of women is relatively a new thing in many churches all over the world.

Arguments against Ordination of Women

A couple of years after its founding, the World Council of Churches set up the Commission on the Life and Work of Women in the Church. In 1953 in Bossey, during the meeting of the three year-old Commission, Ceylon's own D.T. Niles, a respected ecumenical figure, proudly remarked that the church in Ceylon has created a space for women through the "ex officio list of positions" and therefore, ordination of women ministers is not an issue. He said:

there are no women ministers as there is no demand, due to the fact that the aforementioned list of positions for women seems to satisfy their desires for work within the Church. Hence, in Ceylon, the question of women's ordination is irrelevant.³

One may wonder if D.T. Niles had an ear for the voices of women regarding ordination. Yet, the work of the Commission that was first headed by Sarah Chakko of India⁴ opened the path for the recognition of women's participation in the life of the church. By 1958, forty-eight member-churches of the World Council of Churches ordained women fully.⁵ I imagined that the member-churches in Sri Lanka were part of the movement, but I realized

³ Cited in Susannah Herzel, *A Voice for Women* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1981), 23-24.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁵ Emily C. Hewitt and Suzanne R. Hiatt, *Women Priests: Yes or No?* (New York: Seabury Press, 1973), 81.

they have not accepted the idea of women's ordination until much, much later. Today, more and more churches have opened their doors to ordain women ministers.

However, the Orthodox and the Roman Catholic churches, along with the Southern Baptists and biblically conservative denominations continue to refuse women's ordination.⁶ Most women from these churches have internalized the view that ordination is not for women. The arguments against women's ordination range from the view that women are subordinate to men, to the doctrine of "separate but equal," that is, God has set different roles for women and men in the life and work of the church based on anatomy.⁷ Thomas Aquinas, whose thoughts strongly shaped the position of the Roman Catholic church, considered the female sex as an impediment to the Holy Order for "the image of Christ [who] is male,"⁸ and because of her anatomy, "a woman is in the state of subjection."⁹ The Southern Baptists hold that the scripture "prohibits women from exercising authority over men."¹⁰

Other opposition to women's ordination focuses on the notion that there are aspects of priesthood women cannot carry out, such as midnight calls, hearing confessions. Some think that women's voice does not ring with authority and they will only bring chaos and schism to the church. Some people could not just imagine a woman rector, or a pregnant woman presiding over the Eucharist. Other people think that women in the priesthood devalue the role of Mary.¹¹

These views challenge us to go back and re-view the role of women in the early church. This also demands that we re-visit our understanding of the ministry. Is it true that women did not hold important positions in the ministry of the church? Is ministry only for the clergy, and specifically male clergy?

The Role of Women in the Early Church

In the gospels, we read that Jesus had women and men who followed him as his disciples. As the church is called the "body of Christ," Christian tradition holds that the church is commissioned to pursue the christic task that Jesus had demonstrated. It is called to practice the ministry of Jesus to enable people to experience the fullness of life (John 10:10). The church recognizes the different functions of members (Romans 12) as the Spirit endows the believers with a variety of gifts (I Cor. 12) for the ministry. Generally, Christian traditions also embrace the notion of "apostolic succession" that traces the authority for priestly

⁶ *Ibid.*, 80 - 81.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Barbara Brown Zikmund, "Ordination," in *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*, ed. Letty Russell and J. Shannon Clarkson (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 197.

⁹ Hewitt and Hiatt, *Women Priests: Yes or No?*, 75. Aquinas noted that male candidates for priesthood must have no concubine, is not married to a widow, a divorced woman, a harlot or an actress, has not committed adultery or whose wife did not commit fornication, has not committed homicide, does not come from servile status, and is not an illegitimate child.

¹⁰ Zikmund, "Ordination."

¹¹ Hewitt and Hiatt, *Women Priests: Yes or No?*, 94.

ministry back to the first apostles and to Jesus Christ.¹² In the early church, there was no segregation of women and men in the ministry. They functioned as equals. Women held key positions in the church as leaders and as priests. During the Reformation period, there were no distinctions between the lay and the clergy, although there was division of responsibilities.¹³

Revisiting the Concept of Ministry and Vocation

The church – the whole Christian community – is called to continue the ministry of Jesus the Christ in the world. For those who claim to be followers of Jesus of Nazareth, this call becomes an invitation to become part of the faith community. The believer-follower discovers Jesus and the gospel stories compelling. To the believer-follower the gospel gives a deep sense of meaning in life. Thus, following the teachings of Jesus becomes a Christian vocation.

To be a Christian, therefore, means taking on a vocational identity. Such identity is fashioned not only within the template or pattern of specific talents. It is also sharpened by the historical context, and the demands and needs of a particular environment.¹⁴ In this sense, a Christian takes the call seriously not in terms of its uniqueness, but in terms of the “*integrity* of [one’s] response.”¹⁵ While one may have a sense of personal call and vocational identity, one still has to take part in the common ministry of the faith community. Christians, therefore, need to remember that ministry could not be separated from our lifestyle. It is about how we live out our sense of vocation. It is about the collective activity of the whole community of faith, rather than the work of ‘representative’ individuals.¹⁶ So, if by their baptism, all Christians are called to the ministry, and if in Christ there is neither Greek nor Jew, male nor female (Gal. 3:28), feminist theologians ask, “Why can’t women be ordained?” Along this line, members of the community of faith who choose to take a particular gender orientation also ask the same question, why can’t gays and lesbians be ordained too?¹⁷

Ordination as Tradition and Its Development

Ordination is a practice of religions that refers to the process of selecting and blessing religious leaders who are entrusted with the task of guiding the faith community in keeping the sacred teachings and practices of the tradition. In the Christian tradition, the ritual of ordination consists of the laying of hands on and the prayers said for the candidate to confirm the selection. The Constitution of the United Church of Christ in the Philippines

¹² Zikmund, "Ordination," 197.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Lynn N. Rhodes, *Co-Creating: A Feminist Vision of Ministry* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1987), 107.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 107 - 08.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 129.

¹⁷ Zikmund, "Ordination," 196. See also Marilyn Bennett Alexander and James Preston, *We Were Baptized Too: Claiming God’s Grace for Lesbians and Gays* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), Zikmund, "Ordination," 196.

defines an ordained minister as “one who has been called and set apart for the ministry in accordance with the requirements of the church.”¹⁸ Other than the ritual, and the elevated status of the ordained who earns the title “Reverend,” there is not much difference in terms of basic responsibilities of the ordained and lay church workers. Both must carry on the priestly, the prophetic and pastoral aspects of the ministry.

The Reformed Protestant tradition affirms that priesthood is a gift of the Spirit when it believes in the idea of the “priesthood of all believers.” Thus, theologically, I hold that church workers – both lay and ordained – receive the gift of God through the Holy Spirit (2 Cor. 3:5-6) the “sacramental efficacy”¹⁹ of their calling into the “Christic priesthood.”²⁰ The concept of “priesthood of all believers” retrieves the understanding of the early church regarding the equal status of women and men in the ministry.

The equal status of women and men in church ministry, however, changed during the Constantinian period. During this time, the patriarchs of the church began to set up boundaries that privileged the ordained male priests. Consequently, the ordained ministry became a “kind of caste system” that put the clergy as a “social caste” on top of the institutional structure.²¹ This arrangement reflected the system of society as the clergy became the ruling class that installed a sexist and patriarchal hierarchy in church. As time went by, the clerical caste imbibed further a racist and ethnocentric fervor. Today, this is evident not only in the scarcity of women, but also in the dearth of persons of color in the leadership of the church. The attitudes and beliefs prevalent in church regarding the clergy as the “real representative” of the church could be traced to the view of the ordained ministry as a social caste. Church people believe that only the clergy could perform the rites of the sacraments and other important rituals. It is sad to note that the clergy of the postmodern times perpetuate the male-defined hierarchy and enjoy the “benefits” of the power attributed to their position.

The discrimination of women in the ordained ministry is reinforced by the emergence of male interpreters of scriptures who insisted that the authority is passed on through the bishops who were male. This explains why the role of biblical hermeneutics is critical to liberate Christians from their prejudices against women in the ordained ministry.²² D. Rebecca Sangeetha of India points out that hermeneutics should challenge people to think critically and identify their baggage and prejudices that tarnish their interpretation of scriptures. As a young candidate for ordination in the Tamil Evangelical Lutheran Church in India, she said:

¹⁸ United Church of Christ in the Philippines, *Constitution and by-Laws* (Quezon City: United Church of Christ in the Philippines, 1996), Art. II, section 1.

¹⁹ Zikmund, "Ordination," 196.

²⁰ Hewitt and Hiatt, *Women Priests: Yes or No?*, 79.

²¹ Rhodes, *Co-Creating: A Feminist Vision of Ministry*, 112-13. Rhodes cited Rosemary Radford Ruether's idea of the clergy as a social caste created during the time of Constantine.

²² D. Rebecca Sangeetha, "Women's Ordination and Biblical Hermeneutics," in *In God's Image* 23, no. 3 (2004).

part of my 'job-satisfaction' comes from the fact that by my presence and role as a candidate for ministry, I make people to rethink their attitudes towards the scriptures, their concept of priesthood, relationship between men and women, and their understanding of God as a God of justice and equality.²³

Sangeetha's words remind us that we have to refocus our understanding of ministry, the call and vocation. Equally important is for us not to confuse ordination with the patriarchal model of using power.

Ordination and the Issue of Power

In many cases, church people think of ordination in terms of authority and power. Many Christians are oblivious of the danger of using that power to dominate others. In recent years, the church has been rocked with scandals related to abuse of power by the "man of the cloth" on different levels. Although other than his baptism, I could not find a gospel account about Jesus being ordained, ordination is associated with the commitment to serve following Jesus' model (Mk. 10:41-45). The Jesus model of exercising power is service in humility in order to affirm and sustain life.

I bring out this concern because of my observations when I served as chairperson of the examination committee in the conference level of the United Church of Christ in the Philippines. Our task was to examine those pastors who were heading for ordination. One question I usually asked to the candidates was: "Why do you want to be ordained? What difference would your ordination make to the church ministry?" Other than the 'standard' answers, some responses from the female candidates struck me. One woman was honest enough in her answer: she wanted to have a share of the "privileges" given to the male ordained ministers such as the title of "Reverend," and to be nominated or elected to some positions in the church reserved for ordained pastors. Another woman said she would like to wear the purple blouse with the white clerical collar for it gave her a sense of dignity and so people would respect her. It is lamentable to see that women vie for ordination only to be co-opted willingly into the patriarchal mold.

While I saw the inadequacy of these women's answers, I also recognize that somehow, these responses highlight the mis-education of the church about the ministry. Many pastors and church people think that ministry is the vocation solely of the clergy. There is a misunderstanding that ordained church workers are the "real ministers" because they "equate the call and Christian vocation with ordination."²⁴ There are even women pastors who think that ministry is the task of the clergy to empower the church and that the church cannot do anything when they are not there.

Arguments for the equality of women and men in the church and ministry are biblically grounded, and such arguments could be used to support the struggle for women's ordination. However, I have some reservations when women desire ordination only to be co-opted into the patriarchal mold and the view of power and privilege. From where I

²³ *Ibid.*, 34.

²⁴ Rhodes, *Co-Creating: A Feminist Vision of Ministry*, 113.

come, there are still women who struggle for equality with men even if they are already ordained. This shows that in a patriarchal society, women's ordination is still largely a kind of sub-ordination. Moreover, as former chair of the examination committee of our church conference, I have learned about the ploys and manipulations used by both women and men in order to get ordained. These range from literally 'whining and crying' before the examination committee, to the bizarre arrangement of offering donations of material things in exchange for ordination. In such cases, ordination becomes a mockery of the Christian vocation, and it is reduced to an opportunity to misuse power.

Making Connections: Ordination and Asian Feminist Theologizing

Indeed, women all over the world are rising to claim their voices in different fields. There are different shades of feminism that make up a kind of rainbow spectrum. Asian women share some commonalities with sisters from other parts of the globe but we have to recognize their differences. The difference is shaped not only by their geographical locations but also by their social locations, cultures, backgrounds and experiences, races and ethnicities. This is true even among Asian women. Thus, there is a variety of Asian feminist theologies as there are many Asian voices that are distinct from each other. Yet, like a choir, their different voices converge to produce a song to join Mary in singing the *Magnificat* (Lk. 1:47-55).

What is the relevance of ordination to Asian Feminist theologizing? Ordination may be relevant and significant if only to prove that women are equal to men and so women can claim some access to ecclesiastical power. However, with the view that theology is a timely reflection of the gospel in light of particular challenges of one's context, one can pursue feminist theologizing even outside the ecclesiastical hierarchy.

With due respect to those women who choose to be ordained, I wish them to do what they are supposed to do: to serve the people with commitment. Ordained women must carry on the task to "subvert the clergy line"²⁵ that perpetuates the sexist and patriarchal social caste in the church. They must be alert to resist the lure of getting co-opted into the patriarchal hierarchy that privileges some gifts and discriminate against others. Women are called to help people realize the implications of or the "connections between what they do and what happens in the world."²⁶ This involves analysis of social and economic realities that affect the people's need for survival, especially in such a volatile condition of the country. There are many other concerns that we need to attend to. Thus, we cannot afford to spend all our energy in the battle for ordination alone. This is where women in Sri Lanka link their experiences with Asian Feminist Theologizing.

Many cultures in Asia are patriarchal, and so misconceptions about Asian feminism abound. The emerging of women's voices was unsettling and feared. As Antone pointed out, however, Asian feminism is neither a movement of unhappy women, of man-haters, of women who want to be like men in [mis]using power, of middle-class women, nor of

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 116.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

women who simply want to draw attention.²⁷ It is not a movement of copycats of Euro-American feminism. Asian feminism emerged as women respond to the challenges of their particular contexts. It is a movement “towards partnership and transformation”²⁸ of systems and relationships to make life for all flourish. This vision is grounded in the model that Jesus has demonstrated in the gospel stories. This is the overarching vision of Asian feminist theology.

Virginia Fabella, a Filipino feminist, describes Asian feminist theology as one that is (a) born from the womb of Asia; (b) a product of Asian feminist women [and feminist men] who believe in the equality of women and men and wrestle against patriarchal traditions of Christianity; and (c) a reflection on the Asian lived realities in light of the Christian faith.²⁹

One has to take into account the context of Asia: its religious plurality, the increasing poverty experienced by many Asians in the midst of neoliberalism/globalization, the denigration of the Earth, militarization and the war against terrorism in alliance with the rising empire. Asian feminist theology must face the reality that Asia is beset with reality of the HIV and AIDS. With 7.4 million Asian people living with AIDS, the agencies that monitor the spread of HIV and AIDS point to Asia as next in rank to Africa.³⁰ The pandemic is definitely connected with the reality of socio-economic and political problems as well as cultural and religious beliefs and practices that perpetuate the culture of violence against women, children, the sick, differently-abled, and those whom society defines as “the other.” Asian Women’s Resource Centre describes Asian feminist theologizing as an awareness of the situation: [of] gender inequality, economic injustice, ecological destruction and the recognition that the divine immanence is within us. Where life is threatened we are all summoned to engage actively in the world.³¹

Asian feminist theology, therefore, is not merely a copy of feminist theologies around the world. It springs from the womb of Asia, from the struggles that women must wage in order to make abundant life a reality. It constantly engages in dialogue and conversation with the living religions of Asia and with the challenges that Asian contexts pose to theology. Asian feminist theology must also reckon the voices of the marginalized – e.g. gays, lesbians, bisexual, and transgendered people. It listens to the voices of exploited and abused children of Asia, especially those who are victims of child sexual abuses. Moreover, it embraces the Earth as our mother; the Earth as the embodiment of God who sustains our needs in our daily life. Ordained women must, therefore, fulfill their vocation as theologians. Thus, they need to practice the art of critical thinking and the craft of doing

²⁷ Hope Antone, "Asian Feminism: Towards Partnership and Transformation," in *In God's Image* 23, no. 4 (2004).

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 56.

²⁹ Cited in Asian Women's Resource Centre for Culture and Theology (AWRC), *Introduction to Asian Feminist Theologies - Book 1*, ed. Hope Antone, *Modules on Asian Feminist Theologies* (Kuala Lumpur: AWRC, 2005), 35-36.

³⁰ TREAT Asia, HIV/AIDS in Asia (TREAT Asia, 4 July, 2004[cited 9 May, 2006]; available from <http://.amfar.org/cgi-bin/iowa/asia/aids/index.html?record4>. India had 4.58 million people living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA) in 2003 and is projected to surpass South Africa's record.

³¹ Asian Women's Resource Centre for Culture and Theology (AWRC), *Introduction to Asian Feminist Theologies - Book 1*, 37.

theology. In this sense, the people they are ministering will also grow in their theological understanding of the world and the meaning of being Christians in relation to this world.

The Continuing Challenge

Today, there are still segments in the church who could not accept women pastors. The ordained women of Sri Lanka have surely gone a long way, and the struggle to challenge more women to get on board continues. However, while the struggle continues for women to get accepted in the area of the ordained ministry, let it not be the only arena of the struggle. Women must also continue to struggle to think critically and act decisively on significant issues in church and society. Or, should I say, women should not allow themselves to be co-opted to join the bandwagon of male-defined ordination that merely seeks to perpetuate the "social caste." Women must neither allow themselves to be deceived to take the bait of sub-ordination, nor to be distracted from their vocation to truly follow in the steps of Jesus. Certainly, Jesus did not get distracted with the issue of ordination and the ritual that goes with it. He was single-minded only about being baptized, for it initiated him into the ministry of making the reign of God a reality in the lives of people. This good news about the *basileia* of God is the main agenda of Jesus' ministry. From the beginning, he knew already that he did not want to be distracted with the temptations of power, material wealth, and pride that could get into the way of his ministry. The Spirit confirmed his baptism by anointing him to carry on the christic task of bringing the good news for the poor, proclaiming liberty to the captives, healing the sick, restoring sight to the blind, feeding the hungry, giving liberty to the captives, setting free the oppressed. All these are signs that the year of God's favor has come (Lk. 4:18-19).

Jesus simply demonstrated that a person could carry out the christic task when she is clear about the agenda of ministry. Thus, women need to spend more of their energy in nurturing the church in the journey towards the struggle for fullness of life. As an Asian feminist theologian, I dream of a church that sheds off the patriarchal hierarchical encumbrances that makes it slow to respond to the challenges of the times. I dream of a church where women and men share their variety of gifts to make life flourish in this Earth. I therefore invite you to dream with me, and struggle to make such dream come true.

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