



Women in Christianity

Hans Küng



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Translated by John Bowden

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Contents

	Introduction	vii
1.	Women in Earliest Christianity	1
	Women's history too	1
	Jesus – friend of women	2
	Women in the Jewish–Christian Jesus movement	4
	No patriarchal hierarchy	5
	Provisional structures	6
	Women as apostles and prophets?	7
2.	Women in the Early Church	9
	Women apostles and prophets in Paul	9
	Conflicts over the status of women	12
	Gnosticism: an opportunity for women	13
	Women: the losers in history	15
	To be rediscovered: women martyrs, prophets, teachers	19
	Alternative forms of life for women	21
	The shadow sides	22
	Were women emancipated through Christianity?	23
	Tradition as an argument today	25
3.	Women in the Church of the Middle Ages	29
	Augustine: original sin corrupts sexuality	29
	Rigorism in sexual morality	31
	An inter-religious problem	33
	A church of celibate men and the prohibition of marriage	34
	Thomas: women – somewhat defective	38

	Women in the family, politics and business	41
	Repression of women in the church	46
	Mysticism under suspicion	50
	Veneration of Mary on the increase	52
	An ecumenical image of Mary?	56
4.	Women at the Time of the Reformation	61
	Luther's fundamental impulse for reform	61
	The changed situation of women	62
	Fellowship of men and women	64
	The structure of society – still patriarchal	65
	Women in Calvinism and Anglicanism	66
	Emancipation in the 'sects'?	69
	Women as witches	70
	Who was to blame for the witch-craze?	72
	Why the witch-craze?	75
5.	Women in Modernity and Postmodernity	79
	The philosophical revolution and women	80
	The political revolution and women	82
	The industrial revolution and women	83
	Have the churches hindered or encouraged the emancipation of women?	85
	The situation in modern Catholicism	87
	The situation in modern Protestantism	89
	The feminist movement	93
	Questions to the churches	95
	A fellowship of brothers and sisters, free and equal	97
	Specific demands	98
	Conclusion	102
	Notes	105

Introduction

For most of the religions of the world women are a problem; from time immemorial they have been subordinate to men, second-class in the family, politics and business, with limited rights and even limited participation in worship. It is not only in Christianity that equal rights for women is a great unfulfilled concern.

But there is no doubt that whether women should have the same dignity and rights in Christianity as men is a particularly explosive issue. It is true that the emancipation of women in most recent times, especially in the Protestant, Anglican and Old Catholic churches, has made welcome progress. But in the Eastern Orthodox churches, which at any rate accept married priests (though not bishops), and above all in the Roman Catholic church, women are held down in an inferior status. At the parish level pioneering developments may have taken place, despite all the official obstacles, but the prohibition of women servers at mass and of the ordination of women to the diaconate and the priesthood still remains, as does the rigorously negative attitude to contraception, abortion and divorce, which in practice is more often than not at the expense of women. And Roman Catholic canon law, revised after the Second Vatican Council in the old spirit, is androcentric through and through, determined by males. As far as possible, women are kept away from professorial chairs in theology.

In all this Rome refers to 'tradition'. So in this book I shall investigate in particular the 2000-year history of women in Christianity, as far as this is possible within such a framework. The question is how a community structure which was originally quite different later developed the way it did.

I concede that the problem of the position of women in the church only dawned on me at the Second Vatican Council (1962–65), in which I took part as a theological adviser. The 1968 movement also helped the women's movement forward in the church. For me, Pope Paul VI's encyclical *Humanae Vitae* (1968) against contraception was the direct occasion for a wide-ranging 'Inquiry' under the title *Infallible?* (1970). The Vatican did not respond to this inquiry but punished me with an Inquisition (for which there was no legitimate basis) which on 18 December 1979 led to the withdrawal by the church of my permission to teach.

However, my new status at the University of Tübingen after 1980, independent of the faculty, gave me a great opportunity to pursue intensively areas of research which I had long cherished: world religions, world literature and finally also the role of women in Christianity. As early as the summer semester of 1981, with my then assistant Dr Anne Jensen, I held a seminar on Women and Christianity in which Dr Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel of Tübingen and Dr Bernadette Brooten, now at Brandeis University, USA, took part. It was also through them that I decided to commission a two-part research project, supported by the Volkswagen Foundation, on Women and Christianity, which was carried out between 1982 and 1987 under the auspices of the Institute for Ecumenical Research at the University of Tübingen, which remained under my direction.

Chronologically, the project started from two poles: at one end the beginnings of Christianity and at the other the twentieth century. Since historians had hitherto hardly thought women's history worth transmitting, both these part-projects involved the laborious process of reconstructing the history of women at the time, as far as possible by women themselves. Despite the not inconsiderable difficulties, it proved possible to complete both part-projects successfully. The concluding report of the research project Women and Christianity in 1993 and the report

of the Institute for Ecumenical Research both also contain information about the numerous lectures, seminars, working parties and other studies on the problem of Women and Christianity and the dialogue group on feminist theology (both can be obtained in manuscript form from the Institute for Ecumenical Research, Liebermeisterstrasse 18, 72076 Tübingen).

I made my own investigation of the role of women in Christianity in my book *Christianity: Its Essence and History*, the second volume of *The Religious Situation of Our Time* (ET 1995). I did this within the framework of an analysis of the different epoch-making overall constellations or paradigms of Christianity, which make it possible to view the present in the sight of the past:

- the Jewish-apocalyptic paradigm of earliest Christianity (P I);
- the ecumenical-Hellenistic paradigm of Christian antiquity (P II);
- the Roman Catholic paradigm of the Middle Ages (P III);
- the Protestant-Evangelical paradigm of the Reformation (P IV);
- the modern paradigm of reason and progress (P V);
- all this focussed on the beginnings of the ecumenical paradigm of postmodernity which are becoming visible (P VI).

In each of the different paradigms I dealt explicitly with the role of women. Women were mentioned in many different passages, sometimes amounting only to a paragraph or so, sometimes extending over several pages, and their experiences formed a subsidiary thread which ran right through the book. However, to identify them all would have been a major task for the reader interested in the question of the role of women in Christianity. Hence this book. In it I have brought together all the relevant passages, revised them, and provided them with

linking texts, so that the history of women in Christianity as a whole with a view to the present clearly emerges. The origin of the book explains why I had to limit myself to an account of the perspectives of the churches of Western Europe. Perhaps I shall be able to deal in another context with the role of women both in the Orthodox and Eastern churches and also in the churches of the southern hemisphere; so this question must be excluded here. For all their limitations, I hope that my analyses will be useful in resolving the problems which face the churches at the present time.

HANS KÜNG
Tübingen
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1 Women in Earliest Christianity

Women cannot assume any functions of leadership in the Catholic church and cannot be ordained ‘priest’, let alone ‘bishop’. The main reason given for this is that Jesus, who for Christians is the Christ, did not choose any women as apostles. But it is very difficult now, after almost 2000 years, to discover anything about the daily life of the first generation of Christians. After all, we know hardly anything about the normal course of their lives, about their everyday worries, fears and joys. And who made up the earliest Christian community?

Women’s history too

If we want to understand the history of the earliest community we need to remember three things:¹

1. This was not initially a history of Romans and Greeks, but a history of people who were born Jews. Though in the Hellenistic culture of Palestine some may have spoken Aramaic and others Greek, what they communicated to the whole church now coming into being was the world of Jewish ideas, Jewish language and Jewish theology. In this way they also left an indelible stamp on the whole subsequent history of Christianity – including the Gentile Christianity that was to come – down to the present day. The first overall constellation of Christianity (Paradigm I) was the Jewish–Christian paradigm.

2. Nor did historians mostly relate the history of an upper class, but the history of the lower classes: fishermen, farmers, craftsman, little people who normally have no chronicler. The first generations of Christians did not have any political power, nor did they strive for positions in the religious and political

establishment. They formed a small, weak, and discredited group on the periphery of the society of the time, under considerable pressure.

3. Most important of all, however, from the beginning Christianity was not just a movement made up of men; its history also includes the women who followed Jesus. Jesus' practice of calling women, too, to follow him was unconventional and undermined the existing patriarchal structures.

Jesus – friend of women

In the time of Jesus women counted for little in society. As in some cultures even today, they had to avoid the company of men in public. Contemporary Jewish sources are full of animosity towards women, who according to the Jewish historian Josephus are in every respect inferior to men.² Husbands are advised not to talk much even with their own wives, far less with the wives of others. Women withdrew from public life as much as possible. In the temple they had access only to the Court of Women. And their duties in offering prayer were identical to those of slaves.

However, regardless of the question how much of the biographical detail in the Gospels is clear, the evangelists have no inhibitions about talking of Jesus' relations with women. According to them, Jesus dissociated himself from the customary exclusion of women. Not only does Jesus show no contempt for women; he is amazingly open towards them. Women accompany him and his disciples from Galilee to Jerusalem. We are given the names of many of them: Joanna, Susanna, Mary the mother of James and Joses, Salome and 'many other women', first and foremost Mary of Magdala.³ Jesus showed personal affection towards women.⁴ The group of disciples, which travelled around without possessions and had no fixed abode, was given effective support by women and the families of sympathizers, like those of Martha and Mary.

It is indeed the case that Jesus chose only men for the narrower group of the Twelve, which was to represent the people of twelve tribes in the end-time. But originally the twelve were not the only ones to be called 'apostles'.⁵ The apostles, those sent out to proclaim their belief in Jesus' resurrection, form a relatively larger group⁶ which could also have included women; it was the evangelist Luke more than a generation after Jesus who first identified 'the Twelve' with the apostles. However, women clearly play a significant role in the ongoing looser group of Jesus' disciples. These women disciples remained faithful to their master to the end, stood by the cross and observed the burial. The Twelve, one of whom had betrayed Jesus, had already fled.⁷

Sayings of Jesus which are apparently hostile to the family⁸ are to be seen in this context. Anyone who for him is a brother or sister belongs in the 'family of God', which consists of those who do the will of the Father. For them, ties of blood are secondary and the relationship between the sexes loses its significance. However, Jesus of Nazareth, although he himself was unmarried, did not make celibacy a condition of discipleship. Jesus can provide no legitimation for a law of celibacy, just as the Hebrew Bible nowhere praises the unmarried state. The apostles were married and remained so (Paul regarded himself as an exception).⁹ However, the position of women in the society of the time, which was weak both socially and legally, was considerably enhanced by Jesus' prohibition of divorce (in Judaism only a man could draw up a letter of separation).¹⁰ This prohibition too – in Matthew the 'case of adultery' is given as an exception – has a specific focus; it no more excludes failure and forgiveness than do other commandments.

Jesus addressed God tenderly as 'Father', 'Dear Father'. But in doing so he did not intend to stress the masculine side of God. Using the name Father in addressing God does not denote any sexual differentiation in God: God cannot be claimed solely for the male sex. God is not at the same time male: in the Hebrew