

I saw the answer in India

Joan Chittister | Apr. 3, 2008 From Where I Stand

Here's a riddle for you:

What voice of religion is almost impossible to hear -- but is everywhere?

Oh, go on, guess.

Priests? No, it's true that they have gotten to be fewer and fewer -- and in some parts of the world have completely disappeared -- but they have channels of communication that are much louder and clearer than their numbers would warrant.

Politicians? No, they all use religion to justify their political activities so they talk about it plenty. It's hard to believe in what most politicians call "religion" as long as it keeps starving, killing and suppressing people everywhere but they talk about it anyway.

Temples, pagodas, mosques and cathedrals? No, even though people everywhere seem to go to them less these days, there is nothing silent about them. They are still the official voice of religion around the world.

No, the omnipresent but unheard voice of religion I have in mind is the voice of women spiritual leaders. These are women of every faith and denomination -- Hindu gurus, Buddhist nuns, Jewish rabbis, Islamic sheiks, Christian clergywomen, native healers and spiritualist mediums who are carrying the values of their traditions, speaking the word of their sacred texts, practicing the values mandated by their various revelatory documents, building and sustaining faith communities everywhere -- but whose voices are still summarily ignored, suppressed, smothered by the leaders of the faith traditions to which they have given their lives and which thrive because of them.

As I have mentioned in recent columns, I was in Jaipur, India, March 3-10 with more than 450 women spiritual leaders from around the globe meeting around the theme "Making Way for the Feminine for the Good of the World." If that gathering indicated anything at all, it signaled the presence of women religious leaders everywhere, however, well-kept that secret may be in their own religious faith traditions. They have little or no official approbation. But one thing they do have. They have the love and support of the people.

I watched women's devotees by the hundreds sweep into the meeting tent in India where women such as these were speaking -- just to listen to their words for 15 minutes. I saw them line up for blessings and hugs and prayers and smiles of encouragement from women who had been doing the work of their religious traditions all their lives. I saw women light holy candles and chant holy chants and recite sacred texts and interpret the tradition with confidence and courage, however invisible they are to their official traditions everywhere.

And I heard them say strong spiritual words of indictment for religions that still the voice and witness of women. One Hindu brochure, for instance, read: "Shakti is founded and spearheaded by an enlightened woman mystic, Anandmurti Gurumaa, to save girls and empower them with education. Shakti is a wake up call to combat the heinous practices of female infanticide, feticide and the brutalities afflicted on the girl child in India. Sons ? are preferred," the brochure explains, because "they are considered a source of support during old age and for performing religious rites at the time of cremation and subsequently." The work of Gurumaa to raise young women to be self-directing, free, educated and outspoken is presented without apology, without hesitation, in a country where, in the name of religion, women are routinely bought, sold, burned to death and seldom educated.

Dadi Janki, the 92-year-old founding member and now administrator of the million strong Brahma Kumaris and their 8,000 centers in more than 130 countries, devotes herself to the cause of women's rights and leadership positions in the public arena. In her plenary address to the conference, she called in plain terms for the inclusion of women on all levels and dimensions of both civic and religious leadership

Tenzin Palma, a Buddhist nun who is educating Tibetan nuns for ordination in a tradition that has not ordained nuns, simply goes on supporting women's monasteries, sacred philosophy courses, spiritual development and full Buddhist ordination everywhere -- all the while challenging the notion that male monks have better karma -- and are therefore more merit making -- than female monks.

Rabbi Naamah Kelman, the first ordained woman rabbi in Jerusalem, brings a solitary and strong witness to the women of the Hebrew Testament who were the judges, queens and leaders of their people, all the while promoting the first Jerusalem "Women's Torah Project" and its interpretation of scripture from multiple women scholars' points of view.

Native women religionists railed against the colonization of the spiritual lives of Africans by Western colonial religions and, smoldering with anger yet, called Westerners to take their patriarchal religions and leave the continent.

The voices of these women were loud and clear, strong and sure -- but nowhere officially institutionalized and everywhere resisted. For those who are told that the maleness of Jesus is the reason Christian women -- Catholic women -- cannot be members of the clergy, the question becomes a serious one theologically. If Jesus is the reason women must be invisible in the church, how did that same decree get into all the other religions where Jesus is not the focal point? Is the decree really divine -- or simply human, all too human everywhere -- in its origin?

The fact is that women are rising in every religion on earth. Maybe that's really the Divine word we're missing.

These women are involved in every dimension of the human condition -- political arenas, conflict areas, ecological sustainability, the concerns of women and girl-children, religious scholarship and liturgical development. They minister at their peril but they minister long after male ministers have fled the areas. After the armies go raping and plundering by, these spiritual leaders stay in the villages with the women, look after the children, build up the schools, repair the businesses and support the communities.

And yet, in a special session on gender reconciliation in religion, each of them, from every single tradition, cited the same kind of religious suppression of women by the official purveyors of the religion around them: invisibility in religious language; patriarchal interpretation of sacred texts; gender bias against women scholars; lack of institutional recognition of their work, their ministry, and their discipleship; refusal to recognize the authenticity and equality of their spiritual relationship with the divine; rejection of their voices, their direction, their wisdom. God, in every tradition, that is, is a sexist.

And these were only isolated examples of the women I heard in every session of this international forum, which was sponsored by the Global Peace Initiative.

I sat in the midst of them and tried to imagine any of their religious traditions without them. The temples would be empty, the people would be unserved, the sacred texts would all lie fallow in their tabernacles, hollow shells of the impulse which inspired them. But the rituals, apparently, would go on. The question is, are rituals enough to make a religious tradition truly religious? That's really the riddle we need to answer.

From where I stand, it looks like religions everywhere lack religion. At least they lack the vision, the openness and holiness of their founders. One thing is clear: If women finally accept the answer that they aren't wanted in religion and stop struggling to do what the sacred texts, all of them, call for in terms of equality, holiness, discipleship and sanctity -- then prayer, candles, incense and incantations will never be enough to substitute for the spirit of the religion these women bring but whose voices are unheard.

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