

Kiko and Couric: Whew, that was close

Joan Chittister | Sep. 7, 2006 From Where I Stand

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The day Katie Couric became the first woman anchorperson of a prime time news broadcast, Princess Kiko of Japan gave birth to a baby boy. If you think the two items are unrelated, you're right. If you think the two items are related, you're right, too. The question is: Why?

Here's the problem: If you're a girl, we have a little good news, a little bad news for you.

The good news is that you, too, can grow up to be Katie Couric. The bad news is that you cannot yet grow up to be empress of Japan.

The question is not whether or not you want to be either. The question is why it is even an issue. And this is where life gets a little sticky.

The basic problem seems to be that being a Katie Couric simply means that you must be a hard-working, talented, competent and effective woman in a country that has legislated against sex discrimination.

Getting to be ruler of Japan, a once-divine position, on the other hand, means you have to have some established relation to God. And God, we are led to believe, does not express divinity in girls. There's just something about girls that seems to lack what it takes to be divine.

It's not God's fault, of course. It's not anybody's fault really. Things just are what they are. It's just that it can't be done because girls are not as good as boys for some reason that no one can discover. Or if they have discovered it, they don't want to say it because when you say it out loud it sounds so silly. I mean, the answer is that girls are not as good as boys because they're girls. See what I mean? Silly.

The difficulty comes when you realize that this problem is not peculiar to the Japanese. We have a bit of the same problem ourselves - Katie Couric or no Katie Couric - in case you haven't noticed.

Jesus became "man" we are now supposed to say - despite the fact that for centuries we said, "And the Word became "flesh" - as in human. Now, we mean what we mean. The Word became man. Male. No argument about that one. They tell us that they mean "woman," too, when they say "man," of course. Except not always.

And in Japan, too, since the emperor was a god and the gods were male, well, what else could you have for over 2,500 years but male emperors - with the exception of six women who ascended to the throne under special circumstances, a few of them twice. But only when it suited the men in the system. As widows or regents or

rulers in exile, they were put in the position simply in order to save it for male relatives and so eventually abdicated in their relatives' favor. They were, if anything, only the exception that proved the rule. Like pastoral administrators of otherwise empty parishes, for instance.

Katie Couric, on the other hand, is not an empress. She is only an anchorperson. Not a descendant of the gods. So she can be anything she wants to be and get away with it. Once all the tests are in and there's not one piece of data to prove that women are less fully human than men, it's a straight shot to just about anything: scientist, president, corporation executive, heiress, policewoman, doctor, lawyer, whatever. It boggles the imagination what might happen, what has happened.

But emperor in the only recently demoted divine line of emperors? Now, that's another story.

It looked for awhile there, given the lack of male heirs since 1965, that the Japanese were going to have to decide whether they wanted a hereditary emperor or just any male they could find.

So, conservatives came up with amazing ideas for how to avoid the constitutional conflict. One idea was simply to hire concubines - an age-old remedy for the reckless propagation of girl-children - until someone finally got it right. So much for marriage or children or family life, let alone the dignity of women. What we need here is simply sexual service for the sake of the realm.

Or, others said, Japan should create a new aristocracy in order to widen the pool of possible heirs. That way there might be at least one male second-cousin-once-removed somewhere who could simply step in, as they once did in Europe, to preserve the line from getting messed up with female genes.

Fortunately, Japan was saved from having to make the choice. Princess Kiko, wife of the emperor's second son, has just given birth to a boy. Whew. Close. Now we won't have to worry that Aiko, the 4-year-old daughter of the Crown Prince, will someday ascend to the throne. There is a boy standing by. The throne is saved. The country is safe. The imperial family is intact. The heavens are pleased.

Whether or not Japan will now go on to amend the Imperial House Laws to open the throne to women in the future is unclear. (My bet: unlikely.) More than 70 percent of the Japanese say they are ready for a woman emperor and that there is no reason that a female heir ought not to ascend to the throne but why take this equality thing too far if it's not necessary.

Furthermore, you can be sure there will be fierce conservative opposition to the very thought of abandoning the male imperial line. There will be even greater resistance to allowing the idea to be debated in parliament. "It has always been this way," is a powerful argument. It's tradition. It's the will of God.

We, on the other hand, don't have an imperial line to protect, of course, so it all seems quite irrelevant to us. Quaint even. After all, it's 2006. It's the 21st century. Who can possibly let a little thing like a chromosome stand between a woman and her desire to lay down her life for her friends, to serve the tradition as its legitimate heir?

Well, Katie Couric may succeed or fail on her competency. But don't think for a minute that the case is closed or that we ourselves are immune to its implications.

In the middle of the Rhine River, on the St. Lawrence Seaway, on a boat on a river in Pittsburgh, women who feel called by God to serve the people of God are being ordained beyond legitimate diocesan boundaries. Why? Because they have no other choice. There's nothing they can do about it. They have no authority to open the theological discussion of whether or not Jesus became "man" - meaning male - or Jesus became "flesh" - meaning human - and the implications of that answer for the life and structures of the church itself.

They have no right to change what God has made immutable.

So that's that. It's not their fault.

But it's still sexist.

From where I stand, the answer is clear. It's not only what sexism says about women that's wrong. It's what sexism says about God that is the problem. Sexism says that femaleness is the only thing in creation before which God is powerless. It says that the God who parted the Red Sea, drew water from a rock and raised the dead to life goes impotent before a woman. It says that the only substance on earth that God cannot or will not work through is a female. Poor God.

Lucky for us, we don't have an emperor.

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