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Is religion the biggest problem facing feminism today?

by Christine Schenk

Simply Spirit

An email arrived in my inbox about two weeks ago with this provocative subject line: "Is religion the biggest problem facing feminism today?" Turns out, a columnist from *Sojourners*, Jamie Calloway-Hanauer, had blogged about Gloria Steinem's response to Jennifer Aniston at the first ever MAKERS conference held Feb. 10-11 in Los Angeles. Sponsored by PBS and AOL, the conference heard from a veritable who's who of respected women leaders from Gwen Ifill to Ellen DeGeneres to Carol Burnett to, well, Gloria Steinem.

Along with many Catholic women of my generation, I am a big fan of Steinem. She is modest, calm, reasoned, and strong. She leads a movement that is changing the lives of women worldwide for the better. After Aniston asked her "What do you think the biggest problem with feminism today is?" Steinem named religion as one of three "biggest problems" after anti-feminism and income disparity: "What we don't talk about enough is religion. I think that spirituality is one thing. But religion is just politics in the sky. I think we really have to talk about it. Because it gains power from silence."

While I'm not sure I agree that religion is "just politics in the sky" one can easily see why Steinem might believe it. Look at the political flak American sisters experienced from church leaders for supporting expanded access to healthcare for low income people. U.S. bishops opposed the Affordable Care Act because of the quintessentially "women's issue" of access to family planning. Would anyone deny that the "politics of religion" influenced this struggle? Not me. And then the sisters were criticized for being "radical feminists" (whatever that is) to boot.

I've always liked Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza's definition of feminism quoting British suffragist

Rebecca West: "Feminism is the radical notion that women are people." People in the same way men are people. And that means women have the same basic human rights and responsibilities, to themselves and to the human family that men do.

But our world doesn't believe that. Up to 70 percent of women worldwide encounter violence and one in three will be beaten, coerced into sex, or otherwise abused in her life. Six out of ten migrant women from Central America are raped on their journey to the United States. Too often civil and religious authorities look the other way or blame the victims.

If standing up for basic human rights for women makes me a "radical feminist" then I am proud to plead "guilty as charged."

Amnesty International has launched a new "Women's Rights are Human Rights" campaign to address escalating violence and oppression against women throughout the world. They are pushing the United States to join 185 other countries and ratify the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW or the Treaty for the Rights of Women). Already the CEDAW has had far reaching influence in fostering the development of domestic violence laws in Turkey, Nepal, South Africa, and the Republic of Korea as well as anti-trafficking laws in the Ukraine and Moldova.

It is shocking that the United States is the only industrialized democracy and the only country in the Western Hemisphere that has not yet ratified this treaty. Amnesty International is encouraging calls to U.S. Senators and President Obama to ratify and implement the CEDAW. You can find out more at this link.

But I digress. To me Steinem's question could also be framed the other way: "Is feminism the biggest problem facing religion today?" I say this after 20 years at FutureChurch working to bring to visibility women's leadership in the early church. This fire in my belly came after watching too many women friends leave the Catholic church because they found it hopelessly chauvinist, not to say misogynist. These are not lightweight women. One had tirelessly organized diocesan-wide women's listening sessions in the 1980's to provide input for the ill-fated U.S. bishops' pastoral on women. She left after watching her work explode against a brick wall in Rome.

In the early '80's, U.S. bishops had truly listened to nationwide feedback from Catholic women and approved the first draft of what came to be called the "women's pastoral." Among many other things, the bishops included the women's suggestion that "continuing reflection, dialogue and even controversy" on the topic of women's priestly ordination would be valuable. It also asked to open the diaconate to women.

But American bishops would encounter vigorous opposition in Rome. Nine years later, the Vatican's heavily edited fourth and final draft had not only deleted the voices of women, but also those of their own bishops. It now required for U.S. bishops to teach that Jesus deliberately chose to exclude women. To their everlasting credit, on Nov. 17, 1992, by a substantial majority and for the first time in its history, the U.S. Bishops' Conference voted against issuing the doomed pastoral.

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Today, many good women just won't give Catholicism the time of day. And is it any wonder?

By far the worst outcome of this wounding "politics of religion" by Catholic leaders is that it is done in

the name of Jesus who never excluded anyone. Someone once asked me if I ever experienced any conflict between my feminism and my Christianity. To the contrary, I replied, my belief in Jesus gives me strength to be a good feminist.

I am among those cheering Pope Francis on as he works to put more responsive and accountable structures in place in church governance. I am dismayed, however, by the apparent back-burner prioritization of women's concerns. While Cardinal Walter Kasper's recent call for women to be incorporated more fully into church hierarchy is hopeful, we have heard it all before.

The real elephant in the room is that jurisdictional authority in the church rests only with men. This is what no one wants to talk about, even though one obvious first step is to ordain women to the diaconate. Delaying the discussion of women's full equality in church ministry and decision-making comes at no small cost. We risk losing even more women, especially the next generation of wives and mothers who anchor religious belief and practice in Catholic families.

Waiting to address the "women's issue" continues to paint Jesus with the chauvinist brush of those who think they fully represent him. This at a time when feminist biblical scholarship and theology could be breaking open radiant new understandings of Jesus and the God-mystery throughout the whole church, and not only in academia. Surely it can't be that hard to convene a papal commission of feminist theologians, biblical scholars and activists, both male and female, from all over the world.

Rather than wait, couldn't we do what Steinem suggests? Couldn't we begin to talk about it?

[A Sister of St. Joseph, Sr. Christine Schenk served urban families for 18 years as a nurse midwife before co-founding FutureChurch, where she served for 23 years.]

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