

Awakenings

Prophetic Reflections



JOAN D. CHITTISTER

Edited by

*Mary Lou Kownacki
and Mary Hembrow Snyder*

ORBIS  BOOKS
Maryknoll, New York 10545

1.

Theology of Domination

The notion that women are inferior to men morally and intellectually and must be directed and controlled by them—the theology of domination—is a recurring concept in all the religions of the modern world. The position is, at the same time, contrary to the major tenets of creation held by each of the major religions of the world as well. The resulting subjugation and limitation of the roles of women, however, not only bring into question the integrity of the various teachings of particular religious groups but have implications for the broader social order as well.

The teaching of major religions about women derive primarily from two facets of religious philosophy: one, from the definition of the creative process which serves to explain the origins of human life, and two, from the interpretation of the creation myths of each faith which present models of basic human relationships between the sexes. It is these two concepts which are in tension with one another. The definition of the creative process identifies the manner and substance of creation. The creation myths, on the other hand, describe the roles and functions of the creatures of earth. From these two perspectives come the theological teachings about the nature and purpose of human

life. From them also flow the structures, norms and interpretations of human society.

In every major religion the act of creation is described as unitary and equal. The human being is determined to have emanated from a being of pure spirit, a co-equal couple or a hermaphroditic being. In every instance, in other words, creation makes no distinction between males and females. Both males and females, it is taught, have been created from the same substance or same source that is itself without weakness, separation or inferiority. The creative source makes both females and males from the same creative principle.

Based on this point of view, men and women must be equal, capable of like responses, full partners in the human endeavor.

In creation myths, on the other hand, women fall prey to interpretations of blightedness. In the Hindu tradition, Father Heaven must control Mother Earth because she brings forth evil as well as good. Shiva must bring force to bear on Kali to deter her unrestraint from destroying the earth. Buddha's temptation is from the daughters of Mara—Pleasure, Pride and Sensuality. Eve tempts Adam and the human race loses privilege and primal happiness. The fact that Adam is no stronger than Eve in being able to understand or to resist the demonic is ignored in the retelling. The fact that Kali's freedom is forever destroyed without real cause and despite the great good she has done for the human race is overlooked. The fact that Mara's daughters are temptations but not temptresses is given no notice in the analyses. On the contrary, the theological web begins to be spun that women are created by God as carnal or irrational creatures whose role by nature is sexual, whose purpose is secondary, whose value is limited and whose presence is dangerous to the higher functioning of the men of the society. The foundation is laid for women to accept their own oppression as the price of their sanctification. Men, for instance, become the "heads" of the family; women are confined to the home; the way women dress

becomes the explanation of why men rape; since women are by nature incapable of more than physical service, public business and “important” matters become the province of men.

The justification for all forms of social diminishment of women is now complete and the theology of domination becomes a tenet of faith. God, who made women equal to men on one level, does not mean for women to have the opportunity to live that equality out in ways open to men. The creation principle and the creation myth become the polar tensions in which women live their lives. The responsibilities they bear on one hand are canceled by the privileges they are denied on the other.

The history of women, as a result, is one of historical and universal oppression, discrimination and violence. In Buddhism, women who have led lives of total spiritual dedication are trained to take orders from the youngest of male monks. In Islam, women are required to veil their heads and cover their bodies to express their unworthiness and signal the fact that they belong to some man. In Hinduism, women are abandoned by their husbands for higher pursuits and larger dowries or held responsible for his death by virtue of a woman’s bad karma. In most forms of Judaism, women are denied access to religious ritual and education. In Christianity, until recently and in many sectors yet, the legal rights of women have been equated with those of minor children; wife-beating is protected as a domestic right and even the spiritual life of women is dictated, directed and controlled by the men of the faith.

The theology of domination says, in essence, that men and women are created out of the same substance but that men are superior; that God, in effect, made some humans more human than other humans; that some people are in charge of other people and can do whatever is necessary to maintain that God-given right and responsibility. The social implications of such theology is serious. If God built inequality into the human race, then it is acceptable to argue that some races are unequal to

other races. It is clear that the subjugation of whole peoples by another is natural and even desirable. It is obvious that the use of force against other nations and cultures which are considered inferior can be justified and embarked on as a way of life. Even in democracies, some people may be denied the vote because they are inferior, untouchable, unacceptable to those who have gained power, either by force or by natural rights.

The theology of domination makes sexism, racism and militarism of a piece. It brings into clear focus the role of religion in world order, development and peace.