

PAUL'S CONSTRUCTION OF *IMAGO DEI* IN 1 CORINTHIANS 11:7-9 AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR GENDER POWER RELATIONS IN THE ANGLICAN CHURCH OF KENYA: A POSTCOLONIAL FEMINIST EXAMINATION

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1.0 Introduction and background to the study

This paper examines the implications of Paul's perception of *imago Dei* in 1 Cor 11:7-9 for gender power relations in the Anglican Church of Kenya (ACK). While the Genesis text (1:27) describes God as creating *ha-adam* in the 'image of God' "male and female he created them," Paul in 1 Cor 11:7 argues for man's exclusive God-likeness.¹

Paul constructs his perception of *imago Dei* in male and female through unequal gender power relations in 1 Cor 11:1-16, which he justifies through the hierarchy of subordination (v.3) and the obligation of the veil for women (vs. 4-6). Through use of a postcolonial feminist framework, I have elsewhere identified that Paul's construction of gender power relations cannot be properly understood without taking into account the hierarchical gender relationships in the Roman family structure to which he is heavily indebted alongside Jewish and Greek family structures (Mwaniki 2009). The construction of the male gender as the image or representation of the divine may however be traced beyond the Roman Empire to the construction of masculinity and femininity in the ancient Mediterranean world through Greek philosophical thoughts and scientific findings. Identifying male with reason and female with senses, Aristotle and Philo after him depicted a woman as inferior and an incomplete or deformed version of a male (1V, vi., 775a, LCL, quoted in Wegner 1991:51, Gonzalez 2007:21-25). Aristotle further spoke of males as "more divine" or 'godlike' (cited in Conway 2008:2, Gonzalez 2007:22). Philo also argued that the *nous* (the mind-

¹ Paul states: "A man...is the image and glory of God; but the woman is the glory of man" (1 Cor 11:7). (NIV).

the rational part of the soul) is patterned after God (i.e. male is the image of God) but the woman who has no part in the *nous* is not fashioned in the image of God (see Wegner 1991:45). These Greek philosophical thoughts shaped gender relationships and male/female relationship to the divine in the Greek, Jewish and Roman world. Jewish Rabbinic exegesis of the creation accounts for instance “disallowed the divine image to Eve” (Johnson 2004:195).

Paul’s perception of *imago Dei* in 1 Cor 11:7-9 is therefore indebted to these Greek philosophical ideas which he uses to read the creation accounts in Gen 1-2 in a way that excludes a woman from God’s image. Thus, his perception is not a divinely designed condition of a woman in relation to God but a *social construction*, which distorts the perception of *imago Dei* not only in a woman but also in a man and by extension, the perception of the image of God itself which comprises both male and female.

Paul’s distorted socially constructed perception of *imago Dei* in male and female was canonized and as a sacred text continued to shape the theology of *imago Dei* in relation to gender in the future church. Since women ‘cannot’ image God, they ‘cannot’ be God’s true representatives. This theology has therefore influenced the exclusion of women from ordination to priesthood in the history of the Christian tradition.

This paper uses a postcolonial feminist lens through which to enter into a dialogue between the Church Missionary Society (CMS), ACK and the pre-colonial Kenyan perceptions of *imago Dei* in male and female, in relation to Paul. Postcolonial biblical criticism and postcolonial feminist hermeneutics seek to explore and resist imperial and patriarchal structures of subordination even in biblical texts and propose new emancipatory procedures of mutual relationships between human beings.

I will first examine the construction of gender identity in the Kenyan (Kikuyu) pre-colonial context. Secondly, I will identify and address areas in which the CMS and ACK have either mimicked (imitated) or resisted the prevailing perceptions of *imago Dei* in the religious and cultural structures. The paper finally proposes a more egalitarian re-reading of the text and its appropriation in the contemporary church context.

2. The encounter between missionary Christianity, ACK and pre-colonial Kenyan perceptions of *imago Dei* in gender identity

The perception of *imago Dei* in male and female in CMS and currently in ACK cannot be fully conceived without entering into dialogue with the pre-colonial Kenyan perceptions of *imago Dei* in male and female, with which the gospel interacted and continues to interact. In the following section I will identify some of the ways in which the perception of *imago Dei* was constructed through gender, limiting myself to the Kikuyu Kenyan pre-colonial community.

2.1 Perceptions of *imago Dei* in male and female in pre-colonial Kikuyu community

The perception of the image of God in male and female in pre-colonial Kikuyu Kenyan community may be best reflected in ways in which the Kikuyu ethnic group constructed gender power relations. A gender analysis (Mwaniki 2000:16-36 cf. Kenyatta 1938) has revealed that Kikuyu women were empowered in some pre-colonial institutions. They for instance participated in important rites and ceremonies as leaders of women's institutions and as community members. The division of gender roles gave them some economic autonomy especially in agriculture through which they joined a trade network in East Africa. Some elderly women who had supernatural religious powers participated in religious ceremonies which accorded them prestige. With such status, women transcended their traditional confinement in the private sphere.

However, a Kikuyu woman held an inferior status to a man in all Kikuyu traditional institutions. Women for instance had no legal rights to rule, neither were their views sought in all decision-making councils in the socio-political organization starting with the family, clan, village and district council. Women's agricultural autonomy was also less significant because they neither had rights to own land nor had they any say in its disposal (Kenyatta 1938:31).

Besides, a Kikuyu woman was suppressed by cultural attitudes, beliefs, practices and even language (discourse). This is particularly evident through the Kikuyu rites of passage which privileged men and subjected women. Initiation into adulthood (circumcision for boys and clitoridectomy for girls) for example prepared boys to deal with public and political affairs while girls were prepared solely for marriage and procreation, besides their sexual disempowerment through the excision of the clitoris. Through circumcision, even the youngest adult male had a

higher status than the most senior woman did in the Council of Women. Thus, *sexual status counted more than age status* even in matters of land and property inheritance.

Both boys and girls entered into marriage after circumcision. A woman was subjected to a man further through payment of bride price by her husband through, which she became his property. This construction of gender identities distorted/distorts the perception of *imago Dei* in male and female.

2.2 Dialogue between the pre-colonial, CMS and ACK perceptions of *imago Dei*

The history of the CMS in Kenya goes back to 1844 when it started its mission work at the coast. By 1910, the CMS had moved up-country and planted churches in the central part of Kenya (Kikuyuland), following the British colonial occupation of the area by punitive means. What is therefore *common* between the church in Corinth, the church in England (from where the CMS missionaries came), and the missionary church in Kenya is that the church is operating within political imperial/colonial structures and also within existing cultures. It will be interesting to find out whether Paul's struggle to position a woman within the structures of his day is also the struggle of the Church of England, CMS and the ACK.

As indicated in the introduction, Paul's socially constructed view of exclusive male God-likeness continued to distort the theology of *imago Dei* in relation to gender in the Christian tradition including the theology of the Church Fathers, Medieval theology of Thomas Aquinas, and the reformers such as Martin Luther and Calvin among others (see Clark 1983, Gonzalez 2007). Women were kept from leadership positions in the church by excluding them from ordination to priesthood. In the Church of England, this gender-biased theology reinforced the imperial Victorian 'values' of womanhood where Victorian exhortations from the pulpit urged women to find fulfillment in their duties as wives and mothers at home (Gill 1994:4).²

² The breach between King Henry VIII and the pope in the sixteenth century led to the creation of the Church of England as a nationalized church. Important for us here is that gender construction or the perception of *imago Dei* in a woman in the Church of England was not only a biblical and patriarchal issue but also an imperial one. The interplay between patriarchy and British imperialism, which could not be divorced in the state church was reinforced

The CMS missionaries made every effort to liberate Kenyan women from cultural practices which were oppressive to them despite the torture and the resistance with which they were met by the pre-colonial Kenyan communities. Education was one of the areas through which the missionaries empowered a woman despite its gender-biased curriculum. The missionaries also fought against female subordinating practices such as dowry, female circumcision, polygamy, levirate marriages etc. It is however notable that as colonial agents of civilization, the missionaries aimed at ‘civilizing’ African culture more than they aimed at liberating women from patriarchy. The missionaries for instance kept women from ordination and only introduced them to supportive roles in the church. In so doing, they mimicked the existing pre-colonial and colonial religious and political structures, and also Paul’s notion of male headship.

The ACK, improving on what the missionaries did to emancipate women, has shown aspects of *resistance* to the colonial and patriarchal perceptions of a woman by empowering her especially through education and ordination to priesthood, and through encouraging women to participate in diverse ways in the church as lay people. This includes allowing women to sit in forums of decision-making with men, an aspect that is contrary to African culture. On the other hand however, ACK has also shown aspects of *mimicry* by way of imitating Paul, the history of the Christian tradition as well as the pre-colonial Kenyan communities to the detriment of a woman in the following ways:

The hierarchical structure- Although the ACK has made a step ahead of the preceding structures by ordaining women and placing a few in the senior decision-making bodies, women are highly under-represented in ACK hierarchy both in the diocesan and provincial (national) level (Mwaniki 2010:239-336). In this case, the ACK has not deconstructed the patriarchal ideology of male headship that distorts the perception of *imago Dei* in a woman by doubting her intelligence and ability to rule.

and also reinforced the already patriarchally and imperially coded Pauline theology of gender, to the detriment of a woman.

Imaging God as male-This is clear from the androcentric use of the language and symbolisms for God first in the Bible and then in the Prayer Book which is alienating and exclusive. While it is clear that the language that human beings use for God is only metaphorical, the church has not been keen to show a clear dichotomy between the metaphorical and the literal use of metaphors for God.³

Education-Both the ACK and the Kenyan government have not been able to eradicate gender disparities in education. A less percentage of women continues to enroll in higher institutions of learning as compared to that of men with fewer women than men in the fields of Science and Mathematics, and more in humanities (Eshiwani 1983:1, Karanja 2003:1-4). This is due to cultural attitudes and traditional practices.

Land and property ownership-Both the church the Kenyan government have not liberated women from the cultural domination of male ownership of land and family property.⁴

Finally, the church has not put policies in place to address some of the oppressive cultural practices like female genital mutilation (FGM)⁵, dowry, the ideology of male sexual conquest which has resulted to multiple sexual relationships threatening the position of the legal wife in the era of HIV/AIDS epidemic etc.

³ The metaphor for God as 'Father' has for instance been literalized whereby God has been imaged as male. This literalization has constructed gender in a way that only male can image the 'male' God and consequently represent God in 'his' service. Women have therefore been excluded from the image of the divine as well as full service to 'him.'

⁴ According to Kameri Mbote (2006:2), "Women's ownership of property is governed by statutory law, customary laws and religious laws... Most women have access/possession of land but do not legally own it." The national law therefore reinforces traditional laws to the detriment of women.

⁵ The report by Hon. Esther Murugi, the Minister for Gender in Kenya reveals worrying information that "(t)hirty-seven (Kenyan) communities are still carrying out female genital mutilation 10 years after the government banned it..." The most hit is the Maasai community where 93 percent of the women are circumcised and also Meru where 60 per cent of women undergo FGM (Daily Nation 31/8/2009:8, cf. Muriithi 2008:62-65).

3. Proposals for re-imagining the distorted perception of *imago Dei* in male and female in the text and in the contemporary church

Admit that Paul's perception of imago Dei is a social/imperial construction and not a divine condition of gender identity- In a nutshell, Paul builds Scripture (his perception of *imago Dei* in relation to gender) on an existing distorted tradition about gender identity. This socially and imperially constructed text has been given more power than it deserves by canonizing it. It should therefore not continue to govern the perceptions of *imago Dei* and male-female relationships in the church. Given that Paul was a man of his time, then it is not so much about how Paul constructed his perception of *imago Dei*, it is also not so much about how gender has been constructed in the history of the Christian tradition, rather, it is about what the ACK is doing with it and about it to re-image the distorted perception of *imago-Dei* in a woman, both in the text and in the church context. The church in Kenya today is better placed and more privileged than Paul, the Church Fathers and the British missionaries to bring about gender reconstruction both in the church and in the society.

Affirmation of the divine image in male and female- Our view is that both male and female are equal because they are created in the image of God (Gen 1:27). They therefore need to be accorded equal status and opportunities to serve God in the church. We affirm with Christian feminists that although the Bible contains Scriptures that subordinate women, God's universal intention is "to liberate, save, give and sustain life" (Okure 1995:57). The Bible hence ought to be read in liberating ways that challenge structures which create unequal power relations in order to enable human beings to have life in all its fullness (John 10:10).

Affirm egalitarian gender relationships- We propose relationships of mutual interdependence and partnership between husband and wife as opposed to hierarchical relationships at the family level. Studies have shown that unequal power relations between men and women expose an extremely high percentage of women to the risk of HIV and AIDS epidemic, especially within

marriage (Phiri 2003:8-9, Dube 2004:9,⁶ Mwaura 2008:127-128, Nadar 2009:3). They also open the way to violence and abuse of women.

Use egalitarian biblical hermeneutical models- The church can draw some biblical and hermeneutical models to deconstruct the relationships of domination and subordination and reconstruct equal gender relationships. These include the Trinitarian model⁷ and Jesus' treatment of women model⁸ among others, and Contextual Bible Study (CBS) interactive interpretive model.⁹

Enforce egalitarian church structures- The ACK needs to maintain its organizational structure but it should not be a gendered structure. The church therefore ought to enforce policies that ensure equal gender representation in the decision-making forums in all church levels.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, as with Paul, one cannot use a generalized and monolithic description of either the CMS or the ACK's position of a woman. Rather, the church like Paul has played an ambivalent role in regard to the role and status of women. On one hand, it has served as an agent of women's liberation but on the other it has been a catalyst of their subordination especially through the male dominated leadership of the church.

⁶ Records from UNDP&UNAIDS 2001:1 indicate that 80% of women in stable marital relationships were infected by their partners as a result of unequal gender relationships (cited in Dube 2004:9). Patriarchal structures silence women and render them passive sexually so that they are unable to protect themselves from infection.

⁷ The Trinitarian model is fitting to bring about gender equality in the church because it deconstructs the hierarchy of subordination and allows for equal participation of the members based on their diverse gifts.

⁸ Jesus affirmed the humanity of women in the gospels, an action that elevated women's status in a way that had a bearing on women's possible leadership roles in the church.

⁹ This is a community reading practice that supports the reconstruction or transformation of social relation. Its uniqueness lies in its recognition of the untrained or 'ordinary' African reader as a partner in academic Bible reading. It therefore gives the trained reader a safe space to collaborate with the ordinary readers and enables them to use their interpretive resources for their own liberation.

In sum, the patriarchal structures of government in the traditional society, colonialism, national laws and religion have collaborated to maintain the subordinate status of a woman. This affirms the view of the Two-Thirds World postcolonial feminist theologians that imperialism/colonialism, gender and religion have collaborated to the detriment of women in the colonial process. Postcolonial optic calls for disruption of such binary opposition (Dube 2000, Kwok, 2002, 2005). Without justice for women, the church cannot claim to be an agent for human justice because humanity is not exclusively male, but a combination of female and male.

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