

# Women in the World of Christianity: From the Religious Right to Feminist Theology

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## INTRODUCTION

CHRISTIANITY is a religion that has always had a deep involvement with issues relating to women and religion. It was women of the Christian world who started to insist that women should have equal rights to men. In contemporary Christian churches and in the field of theology, themes relating to women have begun to receive a great deal of attention. If one considers issues without including the perspective of women, one gets criticized for viewing things from a male perspective. This shows how important it is to consider the perspective of women: The degree of consideration towards women has become one standard for judging people's views.

This paper is divided into three main parts. Firstly, I will present a broad view of history focusing on the relationship between women and religion. Secondly, I will discuss the Religious Right as an example of a group that views women in the most conservative way. Thirdly, I will discuss current issues surrounding feminist theology, a branch of theology whose proponents' ideas are completely opposite to those of the Religious Right.

Before I go into the details, I would like to make a preliminary remark: Even though we speak of Christianity in a single all-encompassing word, it is no longer possible to make broad generalizations about Christianity as a whole. Currently I am teaching at Doshisha University, but at the same time I am a Protestant minister. Although Christianity initially expanded in Europe, it later branched off into the Eastern and Western worlds. The Western world centered on the Catholic Church, and Protestantism was one of the movements that developed from it. Martin Luther, a religious reformer, was excommunicated from the Catholic Church and this was the beginning of Protestantism.

Luther started a religious reformation because there was criticism over how the Catholic Church operated at the time. Protestantism developed in Germany and Switzerland, and later spread to England. It then went to America, which was the New World, via Holland. Although

there are many Catholics in America, it is the Protestants who have greatly influenced the history and politics of America since the country's founding. Successive generations of presidents have been all Protestants, except for John F. Kennedy who was a Catholic.

Within Protestantism there are many different denominations that view things quite differently from each other. There are various answers to the same question depending on the understanding of the denominations. Viewed in a negative way, this could be seen to show a lack of unity within Protestantism. At the same time, however, this diversity may be the appeal of contemporary Christianity. One might say that Christianity is so broad that it can encompass virtually the whole range of human thought.

I wish to present this broadness within Christianity with a particular focus on women. I do not intend to provide answers from the perspective of Christianity. Rather I would like to present as many issues as possible. This is possibly meaningful for other religions and their believers. Unfortunately, a religion that rushes to answer questions without proper consideration is useless. Various conflicts arise when a religious group tries to impose its own beliefs on people by saying, "We have the answer. This is the answer. You must all believe this."

When considering issues of women, what is important for us is not to rush to find answers. Instead, we should ask ourselves, "what kinds of problems exist, and how can we share these problems together at this time?" I believe that by considering the problems and reflecting on them, we can gradually see the real issues that need to be tackled.

#### CHANGE AND DIVERSITY IN THE UNDERSTANDING OF WOMEN IN CHRISTIANITY

##### *The Diachronic Viewpoint*

Firstly, I would like to discuss change and diversity in the understanding of women in Christianity from the diachronic viewpoint. In other words, we will look at changes in the understanding of women from a historical perspective. Even within the history of Christianity, the understanding of women has undergone great change. In the early period of Christianity, there were virtually no separate roles for men and women. This was because many believers joyfully shared freedom from such conventions. On the other hand, the roles of men and women were strictly separated in society in general. Christianity spread to ancient Greece and Rome. Roman society was strictly patriarchal: Under this system, men held

absolute power. Fathers and grandfathers, who were considered to be the heads of the family, supervised and protected their wives and children. It was not unusual for women and children to be thought of as assets or possessions of the patriarch. Patriarchal societies were fairly common, and they existed not only in Rome but also other societies of the time.

The society of Palestine, where Jesus conducted his missionary work, was also based on an extreme form of patriarchy. It could be said to have been a typically male-centered society. It was considered common sense for people to distinguish between men and women. It was considered inappropriate for people to not think in this way. This was also the case in Japan. For example, in the Meiji period, men and women were seated separately. Judaism had strict rules for separating men and women, as well as those who were considered pure and impure. Jesus intentionally rejected these rules. Since he tried to break down the barriers that had been established by men of religion, they strongly opposed him. This was one reason why Jesus was crucified.

Christianity was then actively propagated in ancient Greece and Rome by missionaries such as Paul. In the early period of propagation, believers felt strongly that Jesus would return to them after a short time. This is an eschatological hope and many Christians believed that the end of the world would arrive with the second coming of Christ. Although it is hard to imagine when we consider what happened later, some women separated from the existing social order and became teachers or prophets. However, no matter how long the believers waited, the end of the world did not arrive; emergent eschatological hopes gradually faded. Around the same time, the systemization of churches began. Under these circumstances, patriarchal thinking, which was the norm for society at the time, gradually seeped into Christianity. The idea that men and women should not be distinguished—a characteristic of early Christianity—slowly disappeared, and the common sense that pervaded society blended into Christianity. I think one can say that fundamentally this situation continued for around 2,000 years. In other words, until the advent of the 20th century, Christianity was mostly dominated by male-centered thinking.

Around the 1960s things finally began to change. At that time, women's movements began in America. They brought to the forefront the issue of women's rights, which had previously been considered taboo. In this environment, a corresponding trend occurred within Christianity, thus triggering the formation of feminist theology. The diversity that we discuss these days, especially in regards to the understanding of women, is something that has spread rapidly since the 1960s.

### *The Synchronic Viewpoint*

I'll now move to the synchronic viewpoint, which means to consider things from the perspective of the current age in which we live. Although the feminist movement began in the 1960s and areas such as feminist theology have developed from it, this does not mean that the entire Western world is moving toward this direction. Just like a swinging pendulum, there are opposing societal forces that insist on traditional values and patriarchal ways of thinking. In other words, a characteristic of the contemporary age is the coexistence of opposing groups: Liberal movements that aim for liberation of women and conservative movements that try to maintain long-established traditions.

We can see this clearly by looking at the US presidential elections. Liberal policies that favored feminists were developed around the time of President Clinton. However, the current president, George W. Bush, takes virtually the opposite position. Of course, this does not mean that President Bush ignores women's issues, but he is among those who dream of an idealized "good old America," in which men assume leadership in order to protect women in the family. So, the coexistence of opposing forces means that things do not simply move in one direction, but rather swing back and forth. If we do not understand that both directions exist, we would only be able to see one side of the issues.

It was only after the 1960s that diversity in the understanding of women became apparent. This is shown in Figure 1. Ancient societies were not necessarily based on patriarchy and, as can be seen in the case of goddess worship, there were times when matriarchy was stronger. Through archaeological research it has become clear that there were societies which privileged feminine deities over masculine ones. However, this did not become the norm in later periods.

Generally Judaism has a masculine image of God, but there is a tradition known as wisdom literature that expressed God through a feminine image. On the other hand, as I have mentioned before, the movement developed by Jesus was not inherited in its entirety by the church later on. Rather, patriarchal thinking became dominant. However, Jesus' attitude towards women later influenced feminist theology.

A concept that must be considered together with patriarchy is sexual dualism. This concept not only views the differences between men and women in mere biological terms, it also ranks and applies values to these differences. For instance, men are considered to be more idealistic, spiritual, and psychic than women. On the other hand, women are thought to be more emotional, instinctive, and physical than men. Sexu-

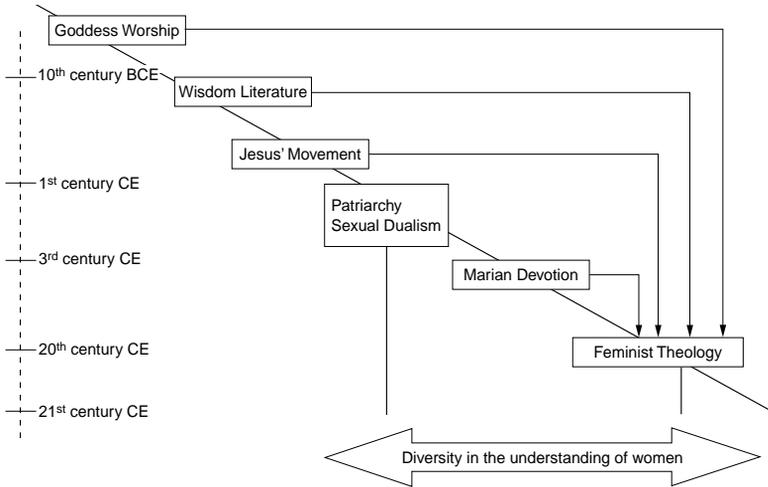


Figure 1

al dualism originated in the thought of Greek philosophers such as Aristotle. In the long run, Christianity has adopted Grecian traditions. It could be said that the women's movement of the 1960s began to overcome these long-held traditions.

One unusual phenomenon within the history of patriarchal Christianity is Marian devotion in Catholicism. When I visit countries where Catholicism is dominant, I often feel that Marian devotion is more apparent than belief in Jesus Christ. There is a great deal of folklore surrounding Mary. One view holds that Marian devotion became widespread in order to balance the dominant masculine view of God. Although Catholicism inherited this type of devotion, Protestantism rejected it at the time of Reformation, holding that it was not essential. Marian devotion has a strong influence on contemporary Catholicism, and this has influenced the feminist movement in both positive and negative ways.

### THE RELIGIOUS RIGHT

We will now turn to the issues concerning feminist theology and the Religious Right, whose ideological positions are diametrically opposed to each other. Needless to say, there are variations that lie between these two extremes. It becomes easier for us to imagine what these variations are once we learn about these extremes.

People within the Religious Right try to find value within tradition and tend to dislike change. In this regard, Christian groups that belong

to the Religious Right basically accept sexual dualism. And the ideas of the Religious Right did not appear suddenly over the last few decades, but were developed over a long period.

On the other hand, feminist theology emerged after the 1960s. However, the issues relating to feminist theology go back a long way. Feminist theology is influenced by goddess worship, wisdom literature, Jesus' movement, and Marian devotion. The diversity within feminist theology developed from the cumulative effects of history, and each position that is made in its name represents an aspect of history.

Although the Religious Right is spoken of as one movement, there is actually diversity within the groups connected to it. For example, there are a number of differences in their political views and perspectives on life. Let me introduce the characteristics of the Religious Right in America, which are quite apparent in society.

The Religious Right draws the most attention during presidential campaigns. In considering the background behind the election of President George W. Bush, the activities of the Religious Right cannot be ignored. In other words, President Bush was elected through the support of the Religious Right. Without their support, he would probably have lost to his opponent, Al Gore. President Bush, therefore, must make sure he does not offend them in every statement he makes.

Let me give you an example. Recently, it was reported in an American scientific magazine that human embryos were made successfully using cloning technology. Although the embryos were destroyed at a particular stage, if one had been allowed to develop and then placed in a woman's womb, a cloned human could, theoretically, have been born. Human beings have reached this stage technologically. President Bush strongly criticized this research and demanded that it be totally banned. Clearly this reflects the thinking of the Religious Right. He criticized the research on the basis that humans should not control life in this manner. Of course, from the viewpoint of national interest, it would be much better to encourage this type of research. America could make a great deal of money by supporting this kind of cutting-edge research in the life sciences, and by developing medicines through obtaining various patents. However, the fact that President Bush criticized this research irrespective of this opportunity shows that we need to consider not only his own religious understanding, but also the influence of the Religious Right.

When considering the formation of the Religious Right, we can see a clear turning point around the 1960s and 1970s. Before the 1960s, the Religious Right held that religious people should only be concerned with faith, and that there was no need for them to be involved in politics.

However, after experiencing the political vicissitudes of the 1960s and 1970s, people within the Religious Right started to think that if they said nothing about political change, America would falter. Since then they have been actively involved in politics. There are many groups within the Religious Right that have nationwide grassroots political branches.

### *The Religious Right's Criticisms*

The Religious Right's understanding of faith is generally clear-cut, and there are clear tendencies in their ways of thinking. People of the Religious Right dislike homosexuality, feminism, liberal welfare policies, relativism, and tolerance and so on. Of course, the focus of criticism varies depending on the group.

In any case, we can say that there are many in the Religious Right who detest homosexuality. They seek traditional family ideals. Although there are various ways of understanding the term "traditional," one of its origins lies historically in the patriarchal family system. In other words, the father is the pillar of the household, the mother obediently follows what her husband says and does all the housework perfectly, and the children listen very carefully to what their parents say—just like the family in "Little House on the Prairie." Americans feel a sense of nostalgia toward this kind of image. People of the Religious Right believe that the collapse of traditional family ideals has resulted in the breakdown of society as a whole. Therefore, they feel a strong sense of mission toward reviving the family of the "good old days." From this point of view, it is extremely hard for them to accept a situation where men love other men, or women love other women. For them, homosexuality is nothing other than an abomination that destroys the traditional family ideal.

It is clear why people of the Religious Right hate feminists. They fear that women will assert themselves, gradually obtain various rights, and ultimately threaten the position of men. The advancement of women in society means that they will ultimately take over the jobs of men. Also, they feel that the differences in traditional gender roles are quite essential. However, from the viewpoint of feminists, gender roles are never absolute or essential. They feel that these were formed within society, and that the concept of "gender" was established to analyze the differences in the roles of men and women. It is quite natural that the Religious Right criticizes feminists, who challenge the superiority of men.

I need to explain why the Religious Right dislikes liberal welfare policies. Under such policies, single mothers who need to raise their children and the economically destitute are assisted financially. However, people of the Religious Right view such assistance as preventing the

establishment of traditional families. For instance, if single mothers received enough money to support themselves and their families, the number of women who choose to live as single mothers would naturally increase. The Religious Right feels that it is dangerous for these kinds of families, who lie outside the framework of the ideal family, to increase.

Relativism is an attitude whereby its proponents view various values equally rather than taking one particular value as being absolute. For people of the Religious Right, this kind of attitude is also intolerable. This is because they believe they alone uphold a standard of value that is absolutely correct.

An example that highlights the relativistic view is the issue of religious education in public schools. In America, religious education in public schools is banned based on the strict constitutional principle of separation of church and state. Recently, there was a legal case surrounding the constitutionality of students praying voluntarily before a football game. The court decided that it was unconstitutional. Even Christian prayers can not be permitted in a public educational institution. In the past, Christian prayers were openly conducted in such places, and this never became a major problem. However, in schools these days there are students—among them Jews and Buddhists—who come from a variety of religious backgrounds. Considering this from the principles of relativism, it is not right to conduct Christian prayers in public schools. However, for those who belong to the Religious Right, this is something very hard to accept. From their perspective, America is based on Christian values. They believe that America should not neglect the special place Christianity holds for the sake of relativism.

The issue of tolerance is related to relativism. Relativism, which requires people to be tolerant of everything, is totally unacceptable for people within the Religious Right. Their basic attitude is to clearly distinguish between what they consider to be acceptable and unacceptable. The issue of tolerance tends to manifest in their attitudes toward other religions. Generally speaking, they tend to be critical of Muslims and often see them as targets for conversion.

### *The Goals of the Religious Right*

When we know what the Religious Right criticize, we can then see their goals. They are aiming for families based on the patriarchal tradition, and they insist that this tradition needs to be revived in contemporary society. They place great value in the institution of marriage, and seek to assert the authority of men. The Promise Keepers is a famous group within the Religious Right whose major policy is to promote male

authority. It is a grassroots movement that consists only of men and aims to restore patriarchal authority.

As opposed to the liberal welfare policies previously mentioned, the Religious Right seeks limited welfare policies. In other words, they believe that the use of public funds should be limited only to those who they believe will maintain the traditional family structure, not to those who are simply economically destitute. Furthermore, one of their ultimate goals is the establishment of America as a Christian nation. President Bush has repeatedly made statements that seem to imply these intentions. Considering this from the principle of separation of church and state, no religion should be allowed to occupy a privileged position in the nation. In reality, however, Christianity—and especially the Protestant tradition—has overwhelming influence in America. This is why the Ten Commandments of Moses are hung on court walls, and why successive presidents take the oath of office with the guidance of a minister while placing their hands on the Bible. Although this is clearly wrong in terms of the principle of separation of church and state, these are accepted as customs. In this way Christianity holds a place in America as the “civil religion” or the “invisible national religion.” And people within the Religious Right seek to make it more visible.

#### FEMINIST THEOLOGY

When discussing contemporary Christianity, feminist theology has become an area that must be taken into account. Indeed, feminist theology encompasses a diverse range of claims and positions, and that very diversity is part of its attraction. I will introduce seven characteristics today.

In terms of the understanding of women, the ideas of feminist theology stand in direct contrast to those of the Religious Right. It is fair to say that feminist theology manifests both a way of thinking and a movement that aims to encompass a diverse range of viewpoints of women.

#### *Re-interpretation of the Historical Origins of Christianity*

Compared to how they were seen within Christianity in later periods, women were viewed in a more positive light during Jesus’ time and immediately after his death among his disciples. This has only recently come to light and I believe that this is one of the achievements of feminist theology. Although that particular period probably represents less than one percent of a 2,000 year history, it is important to know that a progressive understanding of women and their social advancement exist-

ed at that time. Historical and Biblical research of feminist theologians has clarified that progressive ideas and movements, which could counter the patriarchal system of Greece and Rome and sexual dualism, existed in the initial period of Christianity.

*Re-examination of the Bible from the Viewpoint of Women*

Each book of the New Testament was initially handwritten. Then it was all officially compiled into one book in the fourth century. All 27 books were, without exception, handwritten by men. This was also the case with the Old Testament (the Hebrew Bible). Not only did men write these books, they also interpreted them in later years. Therefore, the way the Bible was read, understood, and conveyed was purely from the viewpoint of men. Before the birth of Protestantism, the clergy consisted only of men. And so the process whereby men wrote the Bible, interpreted the Bible, and transmitted the Bible's messages was repeated for nearly 2,000 years. However, when women read it from the viewpoint of women, the interpretation differed from those of men, and they found points that had been missed.

For example, the Bible states: "Wives should submit to their husbands in everything."<sup>1</sup> Until recently, people used these words as a golden rule and said, "It is written in the Bible, so wives must follow their husbands." However, when we read the Bible critically, we can see that those particular words are not expressing the Bible's entire message. Ultimately the Bible does not have any particular view of the sexes. When we read the contents of the Bible and compare them, it is clear that there are many contradictions. However, there is no need to lump these contradictions together. Naturally the Bible has such differences because of where and when the various books were written. The danger of making a particular section of the Bible absolute has been gradually recognized, even when the words are exactly as the Bible states.

*Biblical Translation using "Inclusive Language"*

An example of the changes in understanding the Bible can be found in biblical translation which uses "inclusive language." "Inclusive language" presupposes that past translations used "exclusive language." The Old Testament was written mainly in Hebrew whereas the New Testament was written in Greek. And they were both translated into various languages. Translation always includes interpretation. There have been countless translations, even a number in English. However, it has recently been suggested that these translations contained too much interpretation on the part of the translators who were all men. It has also been

suggested that the translations have been written only from the viewpoint of those in authority, that is, men. Biblical translation using “inclusive language” takes into account discrimination not only against women, but also against black people, Jews and the disabled. In other words, previous translations did not include the viewpoints of these groups, but rather excluded them deliberately. This argument has been raised over the past five or 10 years, and some have strongly insisted that biblical translation needs to be completely revised using more inclusive language. Even today new translations of the Bible are being published one after the other, particularly in English-speaking countries. It is virtually inconceivable that these translations would not use inclusive language at all.

Let me offer an example. In the Christian understanding, God has been connected to the image of “Father.” The words “Our Father in heaven”<sup>2</sup> in The Lord’s Prayer is a call to God that is said to have been suggested by Jesus. This is a common prayer conducted throughout the world on Sundays. The prayer in English has usually started with these words. However, there are people who aim to replace these words because they believe that calling God “Father” privileges men. So, in some cases, “Father” has been replaced with “Our heavenly Parent,” or “Our Father-Mother in heaven,” or “Abba God in heaven.” “Abba” is a word from the Aramaic language that is said to have been used by Jesus. It is a term of affection like “daddy.” Translators are clearly trying to soften the masculinity of God or apply the principles of relativism in using abstract-sounding terms for people of the current age. The relevant section in the original text of the New Testament has the Greek word “Pater,” which obviously means “Father.” However, through the process of translation there has been an effort to change this term to something more appropriate. Of course, this could be considered risky because the original meaning may be altered.

Also, there are complicated issues specific to the contemporary times that affect the problem of translation. In America sexual abuse of children is a serious problem. How can a daughter who has been sexually abused by her father call God “Father”? This is a question that naturally arises. Similarly, women who hate men cannot be told to call God “Father.” Even within the Church, it is gradually being accepted that in cases like these people should be free to call God as they wish. It could be “Mother,” or perhaps some other name.

#### *Formation of New Understandings of God*

A careful reading of the Bible shows that there are many sections where

God is described as a feminine image. Although God is strongly associated with the image of “Father” in the New Testament, such associations rarely appear in the Old Testament. Rather, it seems that the Old Testament, in evoking various images of God, is teaching people the folly of adhering to a fixed image of God. The Old Testament repeatedly warns against idol worship in particular. Humans tend to project their selfish desires onto images of God. Sometimes people fulfill their desires by creating idols.

There have been many cases where men projected a masculine image, such as strength and power, onto God and thus satisfied their own desires. Yet the Bible strictly admonishes such behavior. Therefore, in the search for new understandings of God, there is an attempt to see God through a variety of images by going back to the original spirit of the Bible.

According to the traditional Christian understanding, God existed in heaven. This is revealed in the words “Our Father in heaven.” Although the term heaven is interpreted symbolically today, in ancient times it was considered to be a place where gods and angels lived. However, the image of God ruling earth from heaven has been seen as a problem, particularly in relation to ecological crisis. Therefore, the relationship between God and the earth has been reconsidered recently. A good example of this is the attempt within feminist theology to view God as the God of the Earth, Gaia. There has also been an effort to re-evaluate a maternal understanding of God.

### *Networks of Women from Different Cultures*

The women who were the central figures during the early stages of feminism and feminist theology mainly came from Western, educated, middle class backgrounds. However, other women from developing countries began to point out how limited the views of these women were. They criticized them by saying, “You are only talking about the world of white people,” or “Your statements are only valid in America.” Through such criticisms, it has gradually become accepted that even within the category of “women,” there are a variety of viewpoints. Depending on their viewpoints, there are differences in the themes women raise and how they think.

In acknowledging these criticisms, white women began to see that they needed to consider women’s issues multilaterally through expanding the worldwide network of women. Feminist theologians today are particularly concerned with these issues, and they are beginning to share the themes that are raised in non-Western countries.

*Sharing Methodology with Sexual Minorities*

Although the Religious Right criticizes homosexuals, feminist theology has a protective attitude toward them. This is because both women and homosexuals are victims in societies that are mainly dominated by men. Therefore, feminist theologians and homosexuals who are seeking to claim rights share methodologies which will help them overcome the male-centric way of thinking and the heterosexualism that derives from it.

*Presenting New Views on Ecology*

These days many feminist theologians have a strong interest in ecological issues. This is related to sexual dualism, which I mentioned before. They look to the fact that it has been taken for granted that humans should dominate nature in the history of Western societies, just as it used to be considered normal for men to dominate women. In other words, feminist theologians believe that we need to consider the problem of environmental destruction caused by human selfishness, just as women are reinterpreting their position in male-dominated societies. They do not limit the problem of domination and subordination to the relationship of men and women. Rather, by basing their views on this idea, they are attempting to take on similar problems and make them their own issues. One specific example of this is eco-feminism, which combines feminism and ecology. This is not just mere ideology, but is a specific movement that is receiving widespread support. Eco-feminism is one of the great influences on contemporary feminist theology.

## CONCLUSION

Each religion promotes and accepts particular views of women. This is a matter of freedom of religion. Let us consider the case of the Taliban. It could be said that the Taliban took the views of the Religious Right to their most extreme. In their understanding, women had to be completely discrete and modest. They were obliged to cover up almost all parts of their bodies with clothing or veils. Also, the Taliban believed that women did not need education. Needless to say, this was an extreme case and we need to distinguish it from the general view of women in Islam. In any case, if women actually chose to live in this way under the Taliban, then an outsider could not interfere with their decision. Foolish as that decision may have seemed, their choice had to be respected because of freedom of religion. But did women really choose to do so?

As soon as they were freed from the Taliban's domination, they happily removed their veils and showed their faces in an expression of freedom. This shows, therefore, that the life of women under the Taliban was not of their own choosing.

As I have discussed, there are various views of women in the contemporary age. Women should be free to choose how they live their lives. However, various problems arise when one particular view is imposed over other possibilities. One term that describes this is "paternalism." This term has mainly been used to point out problems that existed in the field of medicine. In the past, patients obediently followed their doctor's orders because the doctor possessed far more medical knowledge than them. All doctors had to do was tell patients what they thought was the best treatment; just as fathers teach their children what they think is best for them. However, in the contemporary medical scene today, this type of relationship between doctors and patients is considered undesirable. In other words, regardless of their own values, doctors need to explain every available option to their patients. They can determine the treatment only when they have gained the understanding of the patients.

The same thing has happened with women: It is paternalistic to impose a particular view onto women without presenting other options. Women hold freedom and responsibility for their lives only when they can choose a way of living for themselves from a variety of options. Each religion must consider this point carefully. This is because a religion's maturity is judged according to how much it guarantees the capability and freedom of women to make their own choices. In other words, a religion that allows women to choose how to live their lives from a range of options are considered mature. In contrast, if a religion holds that men or women must behave in a particular way, it would not only narrow the choices from the start, but also exclude those whose way of thinking does not fit into such a framework. This kind of thinking is very similar to that of the Taliban. A simple and clear-cut message that "things must be done this way" may appear attractive at times. I believe, however, that a religion that rejects such temptation and upholds true freedom will be sought after in the future.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Ephesians 5:24. Edwin H. Palmer et al., 1984 The Holy Bible: New International Version. The New Testament. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 6:9.