Phallic Worship: THE ULTIMATE IDOLATRY
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Phallic Worship
When the human species was developing in the evolution of things, one of its experiences was a feeling of dependence and oneness with nature. The immediate environment was filled with mystery to the emerging mind, and as humankind gained in reflective capacity there was an awe of nature and an awareness of not being able to stand alone or apart from the world.(1) From this dim beginning arose religion. It was the response to the realization that humankind was not an independent center of reality. Whatever form it took, religion’s first manifestations were the veneration of the generative principle as the symbol of the author of life. This was the homage to the forces of nature and the acknowledgement of a solidarity with them.

In the earliest times this worship of the generative principle was pure in idea and fittingly primitive. It was expressed in many ways: worship of the sun, the serpent, stones, pillars, trees. It was also often more directly expressed in various rites connected with an image of the female or male genitalia. Anthropologist George Scott discusses this in his book Phallic Worship: Sex worship has prevailed among all peoples of ancient times, sometimes contemporaneous and often mixed with Star, Serpent, and Tree Worship. The powers of nature were sexualized and endowed with the same feelings, passions, and performing the same functions as human beings.

Among the ancients, whether the Sun, the Serpent, or the Phallic Emblem was worshipped, the idea was the same—the veneration of the generative principle. Thus we find a close relationship between the various mythologies of the ancient nations, and by a comparison of the creeds, ideas, and symbols, can see that they spring from the same source, namely, the worship of the forces and operations of nature. (2)

The worship of the generative principle was easily subject to corruption. Licentious and degrading practices were promoted with it by those who could benefit from them. These were the fertility cults which were later condemned by both Judaism and Christianity. Originally this primitive worship was of the female generative principle because of the inescapable connection between the woman and new life. As the part played by the semen of the male became known, the veneration of the male organ became popular. Anthropologist J.J. Bachofen holds that mother-right belongs to the cultural period preceding the patriarchal. (3) Feminist Caroline Hennessey says:

It should now be entirely clear that the original, the natural, relationship between the sexes was the exact opposite of what we know today. The female, rather than the male, was intuitively recognized as being the superior sex. Deities were at first female and social organizations were at first matriarchal. Both remained this way for many thousands of years before religious concepts and social orders began to change—because they were forced to change as the natural fact of female superiority was suppressed and the mystique of masculine superiority was promulgated. (4)

What was most easily observed in the sex act was the active role of the male as compared to a seemingly less active or passive role of the female. Consequently, the role of the female in procreation was downgraded and the worship of the male generative organ became primary. This was the beginning of phallic worship.

Phallic worship was carried out in many forms such as the veneration of images of the phallus or the veneration of various things like poles, pillars, or "high" places.

As time went on, the role of the woman in generation was more devalued and the theory developed that the female was only a vessel to hold the child until it was developed. It was believed that the male seed was all-important, and some persons even thought that the semen carried a tiny baby which was deposited in the woman where the baby stayed until it was large enough to come out and survive on its own.

This gave the male a reason to feel superior to the female and provided a relief for his feelings of inadequacy in not being able to give birth and bring life into being. Professor Ashley Montagu provides an example:

Man's jealousy of woman's capacity to bear children is nowhere better exhibited than in the Old testament creation story in which man is caused to give birth (from one of his ribs) to woman. (5)

Thus originated the concept of male supremacy and its system of patriarchy. As we have seen, male supremacy was expressed as actual phallic worship but to the primitive mind it was a fitting and natural symbol for the divine.

The role of the woman in procreation had gone from being seen as the only one involved, to being considered passive. In relation to the active role of the male, to the third stage of being merely an incubator, to being seen as a disability. The male seed and the male role were what counted. Doctor Montagu explains this phenomenon:

Men project their unconscious wishes upon the screen of their society and make the institutions and their gods in the image of their desires. Their envy of woman's physiological power causes them to feel weak and inferior, and fear is often added to jealousy. An effective way for men to protect themselves against women, as well as to punish them, is to depreciate their capacities by depreciating their status. One can deny the virtues of women's advantages by treating them as disadvantages and be investing them with mysterious or dangerous properties. By making women objects of fear and something to be
The dualistic notion of reality. The dualistic system divided everything into higher and lower. From his position of dominance the male could easily assign all the higher categories to himself and all the lower categories to woman. The category of the physical fell to education was available to them.

Because the woman was thought to be passive in procreation, she was thought to be passive in everything. And because the male was seen to be active in sex, it was thought that his proper role was to be active in everything.

Not only were sex roles beginning to be stereotyped but the stereotyping had religious roots and overtones.

Besides being founded on error (the female is not passive in procreation), the problems with all this are far-reaching. To begin with, sex role stereotyping is restrictive and hence oppressive to the full human development of both men and women, though it is well documented that women have gotten the worst of it by far.

Another of the serious effects of this system is that it fosters the notion of male supremacy to the point of divinizing the male. Maleness is confused with godliness and the male is identified with God. This is at the expense of the female because superiority is a relational quality. So if the male is superior, the female is inferior. This is not a question of being equal but different (which is impossible, anyway). It is a question of inferiority. And because of the added dimension of the divine, the relationship of the male to female is not just superior to inferior, but it also reaches a higher level in a kind of relation of creator to creature. At least, so it was thought of in the religious mind.

The male as well as the female suffers from this unbalanced relationship. There can be no true love nor friendship in such a relationship of unequal’s. There is no possibility of partnership. There is possible only the relationship of convenience. Another aspect of the problem is to mistake masculinity and femininity for their role in procreation. This is to take the part of the whole and once again, is very restrictive. Thus the primary analogue for masculinity is the physical activity involved in procreation in relation to the passive role of femininity. It carries over to every aspect of life as male initiative and female passivity and is translated as male domination-- male-right, male prerogative, male exclusiveness, male supremacy.

Because male supremacy was reinforced by phallic worship and thus became associated with the sacred, the concept is almost unassailable. Few men wanted to challenge it, and it has only been possible for women to do so fairly recently when sufficient education was available to them.

The concept of male supremacy and female inferiority has been greatly influenced and strengthened by the male reaction to a dualistic notion of reality. The dualistic system divided everything into higher and lower. From his position of dominance the male could easily assign all the higher categories to himself and all the lower categories to woman. The category of the physical fell to woman. Man assumed the spiritual for himself. Phallic worship provided justification.

More than that, woman became the opposite of man. When various qualities were contradictory and could not be held at the same time, they were split with the male assuming the more advantageous characteristics for himself. For example, "initiative" was arrogated by the male and said to belong to masculinity whereas "reserve" was said to be natural to femininity. Though both characteristics may be valuable and virtuous, if one was a male quality it took on more value and its opposite was often ridiculed by men. Human qualities were thus divided into masculine and feminine, and those which were assigned to masculinity were held in higher esteem. In his excellent "Primeval Mitosis," Black leader Eldridge Cleaver shows how racism and sexism are interconnected and based in dualism. (7)

Though Christianity condemns as the heresy of Manichaeism the extreme form of this dualistic view of reality, it nevertheless downgraded woman by its own use of the dualistic categories. This in turn reinforced phallic worship. Writer Una Stannard gives an example:

The first way they “the early Christians” preempted woman's role was by disregarding physical motherhood; unlike virtually all other societies and religions, the early Christians had no ceremonies associated with birth. Physical birth was not celebrated; it was ignored ... Christ's physical birth, and that of all early Christians, was believed to be unimportant except that it enabled one to undergo baptism, one's real, one's spiritual birth. (8)

She goes on to say:

The early philosophers and scientists who studied procreation took the way of the New Testament, the way of the spirit. Unlike the Pilaga of South America or the early Greeks, they could not think of semen as containing microscopic babies; that was too fleshy, too physical, too female a function. Semen became spiritualized: it was the Vital Spark, the First Cause that turned the inert constitutive matter of the female into a living being. (9)

Phallic worship is not just of the ancient past or even of the Middle Ages. Phallic worship survives in the Christianity of today as the continual insistence on the divinization of the male and maleness. Though modern Christians may not process with the image of an enlarged phallus, that their liturgy is filled with "baptized" references to such relics of the past we will leave to others to analyze. But that phallic worship is still present in the Christian religion and theology today, we will discuss.

The Idolatry
In 1967 I helped to organize and I spoke at what was probably the first public conference on women and religion in this country. The conference was held at Albertus Magnus College in Connecticut. What I said profoundly shocked many people. It was widely picked up by the media, and it may have been the first time the challenge was so sharply sounded. Embedded in the exclusion of women from the Catholic priesthood is the insidious notion that Christ is the redeemer in his maleness. Therefore, only a male can represent him…

It is the total humanity of Christ that enables him to be the savior, not his maleness. (10)

Not a few people (11) have called the masculinization of the Christian religion to our attention. In 1964, Margaret Crook commented on it:

...The concept of the masculine nature of the Deity is everywhere strong and inescapable. The one point at which Judaism is strong enough to get away from such limitation and reach out for a concept transcending both male and female appears in 1 of Genesis; but this is not grasped by subsequent writers. (12)

And in a paper called "Sexual Politics" being circulated in women's theological circles, an unnamed African author says:

But this hierarchy of authority (stemming from God) is compounded by His. As a symbol of God His maleness profoundly affects both our theological teaching and ecclesiastical practice and thus our general attitude. (13)

In a study of attitudes concerning the ordination of women, The Rev. David Hawkins summarizes:

There exists a cluster of theological objections to the ordination of women based upon the assumptions that the female is a less true or complete image of God than the male and that therefore women as a sex are incapable or less capable of ministry’s grace and its competent exercise. This view appears to have its source in the Biblical concept of God as "he." (14)

And, critical of their views, Hawkins says:

••• Both. Eric Mascall and V. A. Demont focus upon Christ’s temporal necessity of masculinity at the expense of his humanity. He is seen more as a man than as Man. (15)

Nor am I the only one who is beginning to see how false to true religion is the divinization of the male. Several writers have recently called this Idolatry. In an article calling for equal participation of women in the church., the liturgist, The Rev. Robert Hovda says:

But most of all it [the church] needs prophets which it always has hidden, unpopular, or even persecuted though they may be. Prophets to unmask and to condemn all our idolatries, all our slavery to custom and to culture (whether of the past or present). (16)

In her forthright article, "Women's Liberation and the Church," Dr. Nelle Morton asserts:

As Christ is one, as there LS one baptism, there can be only one membersh.ip, one minLstry.To dLstort it into eLther a male or a female one is idolatry. (17)

Canonist Clara Maria Henning in a perceptive article on human relations in the church. writes:

There LS absolutely no duty in the Church. that could not and has not been done, perhaps in another form, by women, and that should not be performed also by women. If we cannot accept this, let us call ourselves a sect of phallus worship, for that factor alone would seem to matter. (18)

The evidence is overwhelming that in the church there is an identification of deity with maleness. This notion is to found in both the public and the private mind. Official denials to the contrary, there is a strong belief that God is male. The corollary follows that only the male can "deal in the divine," do such things as: represent God as priest, perform "sacred" acts such as certain liturgical functions or perform quasi-sacred acts (acts closely associated with the divine) such as explain God (preach, teach, etc.). The male also has the rights of "lordship" over the female. The many implications of this we will not go into here.

An interesting note about all this is that "official denials to the contrary' means: in their most abstract theological treatises most sophisticated male theologians disclaim sexuality in God. God is beyond sexuality, they say. But when it comes to the concrete consideration of the role, status, or even the nature of woman, the real beliefs and feelings of these same theologians are revealed.

Just a few very recent examples will be cited to show what belief exists in the male mind today about maleness and its relationship to God. The following were taken from the report of the Special Committee of the House of Bishops on the ordination of women. These statements were among those put forth by those opposing the ordination of women:
In sum, we found ourselves often using the word "representative" in its two separate contexts, as expressive of part of the central mystery of Priesthood. This duality of role, in quite different ways, seemed to several of us to pose the question whether representation implied or required male-ness as a necessary attribute …

In the case of Episcopacy, as in that of Priesthood, the suggestion of a duality of representative roles raised in some of our minds the question as to the significance of male-ness as a necessary attribute or characteristic of the Bishop. Father-in-God imagery is that of a male figure and one of us doubts the extraordinary tension and problems which could confront the Church were women to be chosen as Bishops. But the question remains, in some of our minds, whether it can be said that female-ness is a direct impediment to their consecration as Bishops. (19)

Father John Heidt (Marquette University) has pointed out that the Christian Priest, unlike the pagan priest, is a sacrament of the givenness of the Christian religion--of the initial creative and recreative act of God towards mankind. On the human level, this is symbolized in masculinity as biologically expressed in the male. A woman Priest, therefore, must lack the full symbolic expression of the meaning of Christian Priesthood, and to that extent must be defective. (20)

In the report of the Archbishops' Commission on Women and Holy Orders (CIO London, 1965), Canon Demont reminds us that in the non-theistic cults, a female priesthood is common and appropriate. But the Christian cultic minister symbolizes the fact that the Church exists through the initiating act of God as transcending nature, and this symbolism is normally and adequately expressed in the male Priesthood. I should add to this statement the thought that the ordained Christian Priest must act officially in the person of Christ, and male-ness is therefore required for a Priest to act in this way. (21)

If Episcopal sources are cited often it is not because the members of that church are more heretical than the members of other Christian churches. It is rather because there are many recent statements on the subject by Episcopalians because that church is actively considering the ordination of Women, whereas, in a church like the Roman, the thought has hardly been permitted to cross the mind of the hierarchy.

How the male mind of the church considers women is exemplified by the argument put forth by the well-known Roman theologian, The Rev. Louis Boyer. He contends that God could not be considered in any way as feminine. He holds that motherhood is the chief feminine characteristic and that motherhood is somehow defective because it is passive and dependent on fatherhood. He then draws the conclusion that since there can be no void nor lack in God, femininity is the sign of absolute distinction from God of the creature as such. (22) Implied in this statement is that fatherhood is not lacking, and since fatherhood is a male virtue, maleness is not a sign of distinction from God.

Two other statements should be cited because by the very protestations of denial they contain, they reveal perhaps better than anything the true thinking of their authors. The first is from the Episcopal Bishop of California, The Very Rev. Bishop C. Kilmer Myers, who is crusading against the ordination of women:

A priest is a "God symbol" whether he likes it or not. In the imagery of both the Old and New Testament God is represented in masculine imagery. The Father begets the Son. This is essential to the givenness of the Christian Faith and to tamper with this imagery is to change that Faith into something else.

Of course this does not mean that God is a male. The Biblical language is the language of analogy. It is imperfect. Nevertheless, it has meaning. The male image about God pertains to the Divine initiative in creation. Initiative is in itself a male rather than a female attribute. This is not an assertion of male superiority. (23)

Then from a Roman Catholic layman from St. Louis University:

But what would be left of Jesus' message if the Fatherhood of God were denied or seriously modified? And what is left of Christianity if the preeminence and uniqueness of Jesus were denied?

It is important that theologians, in writing about God, reaffirm the traditional belief that he embraces all perfection, including the feminine. But for them to begin tampering with the language and concepts of the gospel in order to serve pressing social needs is potentially disastrous. (24)

Finally, a quotation from an experiment. In a liturgy designed by feminists so that patriarchal references to man and maleness were excluded from divinity and more fitting phrases substituted, we have a reaction. Here is an example of what the liturgy was like: for the traditional wording of the Sign of the Cross was substituted, "In the Name of the Creator, and of the Redeemer, and of the Sanctifier." Here is one reaction:

Perhaps the most telling remarks of the evening came from a seminarian commenting on the liturgy of the evening Mass, 'I really felt bad about throwing out the father.' Since the customary Mass liturgy stresses the masculine father/son image of God rather strongly, the danger of worshipping a glorified male alter ego instead of God constitutes a serious problem for men in the church, especially so for priests and bishops, a problem that the church has ignored almost entirely. (25)
The National Conference of Catholic Bishops have said very little on the subject. But when their theological commission on the priesthood put out a report saying in passing that there was no theological objection to the ordination of women, the bishops would not approve the report. They would not even publish the report for fear it might be construed as an approval. (26)

In the first report of the N.C.C.B. on the ordination of women there is evidence of a belief in male supremacy. Their report is so brief that its pages need no numbering. The report lists "several scriptural and theological justifications… why women are not eligible for ordination." The fifth reason argues that since by divine plan Christ became incarnated as male, the priest who is his representative must also be male. Then the report “somewhat tentatively” concludes that this needs further study. (27)

Besides all the above quotations giving evidence of a belief in the church in male supremacy touching on divinity, there have been a number of recent pronouncements and prohibitions which also point in that direction.(28) For example: The Vatican refused to recognize the credentials of a woman proposed as a diplomat to the Holy See. The official reason given was because she was a woman. (29)

After a recent furor the Vatican decreed that women must continue the ancient custom of covering their heads in church. (This ancient custom signifies inferiority.) At the same time, men, in their superiority, come into the divine presence bareheaded. (30)

Then we have the most recent episode. The Vatican decreed that women cannot perform any liturgical function. In reacting to worldwide protest from women, various spokesmales said women could, unofficially read the lessons at Mass, i.e., that women could perform these functions but they could not have the title nor the rights of the function. (31) We must also remember that it is on the "books" that women must remain outside the sanctuary even when they unofficially read the lessons.) (32)

This is idolatry. It is the remnant of phallic worship in modern disguise, a sophisticated extension of the ancient phallic worship.

The evidence shows that a belief exists among Christians that women must be excluded from the priesthood because maleness is essential to the second person of the trinity as the incarnate Son of God and to the first person of the trinity who is the Father in generating the Son and in the act of creating and recreating.

For these people this is not just a matter of symbolism. They insist that women must be excluded from the sacred no matter how much women want to serve to the fullness of their capacities nor no matter how much ministers are needed. These Christians deny that it could have been accidental to the Christ to have been born male. They cringe at the thought that the Christus could have been a Christa. The expression "God the Mother" grates on their ears. They can not see how motherhood could be a fit symbol for the processive act in the trinity traditionally called "generation" by theologians, nor for the creative act of God toward nature. The second person of the trinity could not be God the Daughter. For these persons, women cannot represent divinity because the feminine cannot be found in God. But to finish their syllogism and prove them idolators: men can and do represent divinity. Therefore, the masculine is found in God.

What these men have done is to make God in their own image and likeness and what they worship in God is themselves. I say 'men' because the teaching and ruling authority of the church is exclusively male. It is the male hierarchy and the male theologians who have taught and explained this doctrine of male supremacy. But for these male authorities, more than likely the common, ordinary people would have seen through the heresy long ago.

Therein lies the idolatry: making God male and making maleness God. Phallic worship is a graven image. It results in a sexual hierarchy which debases all humanity. It mistakes the male for God. It glorifies the "so called" masculine qualities while despising the "so-called" feminine qualities. It identifies part of humanity, the male part, with the divine and associates women with the demonic.

Male worship is death dealing not only to women but to all of creation. It does not promote growth and development. It has resulted in a history of brutalizing women. It restricts men to half the human qualities, truncating them and forcing them into a lopsided mold.

Theology itself is tarnished by this heresy. God is made to manifest the most masculine qualities: authoritarian, omnipotent, infinite, great. Wars are waged in his name as the Crusades, and in modern times war is seen as a fitting Christian way to handle problems on the international level. We are all familiar with that in this country.

The connection which must be made explicit here is that war is a masculine way to handle conflict. Guns are a particularly masculine thing. Historian Charles Ferguson explains how the gun is a male symbol bordering on the religious. (33)
There has developed a deep rapport between the man and his new source of strength. Something almost religious and ceremonial went along with firing the gun. Smoke rose like incense from its discharge, the sound of it spoke like a thunderclap, and it gave man a feeling that the noise in his hands echoed and was associated with the power of the heavens.

Perhaps from this we can better understand how a President Nixon could stand before the American people after the invasion of Cambodia and say: "We will not be humiliated. It is not our power but our will and character that is being tested tonight." He agonized, he said, over the specter of an America that acted like "a pitiful, helpless giant." He vowed that he would not see the nation become a second-rate power and "accept the first defeat in its proud 190-year history." More than two years later Nixon was still carrying on the "holy" war and declaring he must have "peace with honor." The American people understood and accepted that religious symbolism. That attitude could easily bring about the nuclear destruction of the world. For a more complete discussion of this see Ms. Lucy Komisar's article, "Violence and the Masculine Mystique." (34)

Several points need further clarification. For example, no one would claim that everyone in the church believes in the cult of masculinity or that the belief is explicitly defined doctrine (although the exclusion of women from the priesthood is a matter of canon law).

Nor is a return to a matriarchal system being urged. The female is not superior to the male nor will feminism solve all the problems of the world.

What is being urged is an honest look at Christianity and the basis of its beliefs and practices. The male-made myths of religion must be demasculinized something like the way they have been demythologized. This will bring about a radical change in all religion and in Christianity in particular. It will also help to bring about a change in the man/woman relationship and a demasculinization of our culture which is so closely linked to religion.

Unless feminists become iconoclasts and pull down this false idol of phallic worship there is a danger that it will destroy us. Phallic worship is the ultimate idolatry because it is the final usurpation of the power of God by carrying within itself the potentiality for the destruction of all creation.

To SUM it up, we have seen that religion arose as the expression of a feeling of oneness and awe for the mystery of nature. This was a fitting primitive homage to the generative principle, first of the female because of her obvious connection with new life. When the part of the male in the generative act was realized, phallic worship developed and with it, the social system of patriarchy. Once men discovered their role in generation, they did not seem content to share generation with women; rather they fabricated ways to depreciate the role played by the female. In a society placing such a high value on procreation, status was derived from this role. Thus the status of women was downgraded. The invention of the dualistic concept of reality gave males a philosophical articulation for their feeling of supremacy and at the same time, phallic worship provided dualism with a religious justification. Phallic worship was carried out in a very literal way in the ancient past but there is much evidence to show that phallic worship survives today among Christians in the modern disguise of a belief in male supremacy and in an insistence that maleness is essential to the divinity. This belief is manifested both by explicit statement and by the stubborn, almost hysterical refusal to permit women a place in the realm of the sacred or the sacerdotal. This is idolatry because it mistakes the male for God and makes God male. The result is the degradation of women, the truncating of men and the overmasculinization of society. Feminists must become iconoclasts and pull down this false idol. They must demasculinize the male-made-Myths something like the way they have been demythologized. Unless this happens, phallic worship~ may result in the destruction of the universe. This will be the final usurpation of the power of God and is the Ultimate Idolatry.

NOTES


6. Ibid., p. 22.


9. Ibid., p. 27.
11. The list is so long that my Bibliography on Women and Religion 1965-72 now stretches to 25 pages. Of course, not all the listing are on this precise topic, but many discuss it.
15. Ibid., p. 80.
20. Ibid., p. 7.
28. It must be noted that disciplinary decrees are to be distinguished from dogmatic statements. Disciplinary decrees are not matters "of faith." They can be changed. But if something is important enough to become a matter of written, public law it must be an indication, at least, of an attitude to be taken seriously.