

**Patriarchy, Leadership, and the ‘Happy Churchwife Heroine’
What We Are not Told and What We Do not Hear**

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Abstract

Far from being passé, patriarchal power structures continue to define the Christian Church in Western democratic societies, undercutting the rhetoric and legislation affording equal opportunities, equal rights, and social and ideological equality to women as well as men. Consequently, women continue to be underrepresented among the most senior and prestigious leadership positions in the Church. Rather than being superficially anti-male, the critique in this paper engages with patriarchy in the Christian Church as an inequitable, unjust, and discriminatory ideological system and process that may be supported or opposed by both men and women. General and specific discriminatory practices are delineated, and, it is suggested, if these practices are not addressed and eradicated by the Church in modern Western democratic societies, then the Church will continue to weaken and self-implode into an even worse male mediocrity and female subservience than is found today, though it may continue to survive as a Spiritless post-Christian social institution.

Church and Identity

A plethora of serious issues are emerging in contemporary society that will critically engage the attention of the Christian Church in democratic Western countries. How the Church attends to these issues will determine in part the Church’s continuing relevance, integrity, and effectiveness at global, national and local community levels. In order for the greatest common good to occur, these issues need to be addressed by the Christian Church in unified shared presence, a being-together-in-community (Secomb, 2003, p. 9), as much as is possible. One of these challenges, patriarchy, will be briefly discussed here, since, because of its longevity and historical rootage in society and culture, it presents one of the greatest challenges to an authentic Christian (Christ-inspired) identity in the twenty-first century.

Identities are formulated by the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past (Hall, 1990, p. 226). A church denomination propagates disservice to God and injustice to humanity by trying to maintain the status quo of the past cultures of Christ’s day or of the various dominant cultures encountered in the historical development of the various Christian denominations. Some aspects of organisational and institutional identity have been branded by pervasive early century influences from the ideas of Greek and Roman philosophy, being retained on the basis of various religious interpretations (e.g., Pauline textual interpretations), biological differences (e.g., Freudian genitals to hormones and caring for children), institutional (bearing and caring for children, sexual services for men) and social psychological explanations (e.g., types and stereotypes, socialisation), anthropological emphasis (e.g., how society or the church is organised), tradition, and so forth.

Patriarchy and Society: What We Know

Patriarchy, as a term, has a complexity of meaning (Gordon & Hunter, 1998). In this paper, the term is used in the general sense of **a system of graded subjugations and oppressions (Green-McCreight, 2000), that de-valorise, exploit, and disadvantage women by claiming male leadership and superiority as the norm.** Patriarchy (with its accompanying paternalism, authoritarianism, and hierarchy) is deeply rooted in early Greco-Roman philosophies (Moore & Anderson, 2003), further consolidated by the conversion of Constantine to Christianity in 306 AD and the Council of Nicea in 325 AD. Currently, patriarchy continues to evolve into new forms reinscribing the old. Religious equality lags behind in the practical expression of it (orthopraxis). Patriarchal power structures (Gilbert & Taylor, 1991; Wood, 1994) and male dominance, even from very young boys (Tutchell, 1990), continue to be the rule in much of contemporary Western society (Connell, 1991), though it is recognised that some countries are removing incrementally some of the patriarchal barriers once faced by women.

Women are still too often considered to be culturally, vocationally, and religiously inferior (Adams, 2007), and, consequently, are expected to be culturally, vocationally, and religiously submissive and subservient – what patriarchy would describe as being ‘treated fairly’. This expectation relates to Winch’s (1958) notion that “social relations are expressions of ideas about reality” (p. 23). The gendered myth of the woman as the happy housewife heroine (Friedan, 1963), now considered to be passé by many younger women, nevertheless continues in much of the Christian Church as the gendered myth of the woman as the ‘happy churchwife heroine’. This patriarchal myth is increasingly conflicting with current realities and perspectives (Chin, Lott, Rice, & Sanchez, 2007), though there remains in some Western societies, such as Australia (Elder, 2007), a patriarchal gender order within the particular structural form of capitalist patriarchy noted many years ago by Eisenstein (1979), in which women continue to work in particular industries and sectors and, on average, still earn less than men (Summers, 2003).

Notwithstanding the outstanding contributions of many modern individual women, such considerations cohere with the standpoint of the wider community, as demonstrated in fields such as science, mathematics, and information and communications technology (Burke & Mattis, 2007; Fine, 2006; Symonds, 2007), the academy (Cotterill, Jackson, & Letherby, 2007) and education (Peters, 2004), and more generally pervades organisational management and leadership in hegemonic corporate culture (Halford & Leonard, 2001). This standpoint flourishes in an international context of mistreatment and lowly status of women in the international arena (MacKinnon, 2007). As Alanen (1992) noted in the context of a traditional sociological standpoint, men were dominant and so sociology asked questions that men wanted answered, questions that too often arose from a desire “to pacify, control, exploit or manipulate women and to glorify forms of masculinity by understanding women as different from, less than ... men” (pp. 50-51).

Even in 2008, these professions are still dominated by men, with a staggering disparity between the number of female and male persons in senior positions. While competent women have to contend with the reality of glass ceilings and walls, and do not receive the same support and encouragement as men, weaker performing men are allowed to ride the escalator or the executive elevator (Peters, 2004, pp. 260-61) to

privileged positions. Stereotypical bureaucratic organisations remain as patriarchal contracts involving organisational self-interest, manipulative tactics, and political behaviour (Fairholm, 1991, p. 135).

Patriarchy as System and Process

Having said this, however, a critique of patriarchy needs to be, and seen to be, an engagement with an inequitable, unjust, and discriminatory ideological system and process that unfairly advantages (some) men and disadvantages (many) women, rather than being seen as superficially inherently anti-male (Webb, 1999, p.16). Indeed, men may suffer from this system equally as badly as women, and there is a group of women who have ‘clung defiantly to the idea of dependency on a man for no other reason than to provide themselves with a comfortable and prosperous lifestyle’ (Mackay, 2007, p. 29). As such, patriarchy as a system may be supported or opposed by both men and women. Messner (1997), for example, identified eleven men’s movements with three discrete orientations: the anti-feminist, the anti-patriarchal, and the racial and sexual. Nevertheless, patriarchy affords less opportunity for females to reach their full potential within society and the church system. This lack of opportunity, in spite of equal rights rhetoric and legislation, begs the question as to the ways in which the different forms of (patriarchal) power continue to operate within the field (Bourdieu, 1998) of the Christian Church.

Patriarchy is Alive and Well in the Christian Church

Patriarchy defines girls and women by what they are not; that is, they are not male, and, therefore, they must be subordinate to men. More often than not, it is blind to its behaviours, and cannot countenance that it might be in any way flawed in its perceptions, attitudes and treatment towards girls and women. There is no potentially liberating engagement to help to ameliorate the likelihood of reductionist distortions based on ignorance, fear, or prejudice.

As with church exclusive separatism, patriarchy, in practice though not necessarily in rhetoric, places an emphasis on contrast, distinctiveness, and difference, wherein the male identity tends to be conflated with difference from, and indifference to, female identity. There is a lack of realistic connectivity to and empathy with girls and women, producing gendered binaries and hierarchies. In essence, **patriarchy in religion may be seen to be a system wherein males project their own inadequacies, fears, weaknesses and vulnerabilities onto women, so that they themselves can continue to ‘rule’ in positions of power and authority over the projected weaker sex – in the name of religion.**

Females continue to be underrepresented among the most senior and prestigious positions in Christian churches. Institutional patriarchy maintains a gendered culture in these churches that disadvantages women, and most women work either in a voluntary capacity or in the lower echelons of church employment. Women are disadvantaged at many levels (e.g., at structural and pay levels), through the collective failure of churches to recognise that **Christ is the unique head of the Christian Church**, not males in the Church. Males and females equally form the Body of Christ, wherein women and men are equally and ideologically capable of holding leading positions.

An intelligent reading of the Gospels indicates that Jesus treated women and men equally, and, as a reformer, was intent on breaking down the barriers between women and men (Swindler, 2007). Patriarchy, however, may be incapable of recognising, or acting to reduce, inequality and disadvantage, since it perceives women to be the problem in the first place. At the very least, the patriarchal perspective is keen to retain a pragmatic dogma that the patriarchal system works well for the male hierarchy, and should be maintained.

Patriarchy and Discrimination in Church Leadership: What We Are not Told and What We Do not Hear

The more specific question concerning current church leadership has moved from “Why *can* women not do as well as men in leadership?” (women *can* do as well) to “Why *do* women not do as well as men in leadership?” (women *do* do as well) to “**Why *will* women not do as well as men in leadership?**”

Patriarchal ideology, to a significant degree, answers the latter question. And from a Total Quality Management perspective, patriarchy may be viewed as a system that can best be changed by church leadership and by women not socialised into patriarchal ideology collectively challenging it. If there is nil or incremental change, then it is reasonable to suspect that the church leadership is nurturing, sustaining, and profiting from the system, as well as most church women being quiescent and too timid to challenge the inadequacy of the church being represented only in terms of men.

How does discrimination work within the gendered micropolitical processes of a patriarchal and androcentric church or faith tradition? In a general sense, despite the fact that church membership consists of more women than men, the voices of women are not heard in the ‘conversations that we are’ (Gadamer, 1982, p. xxiii), so that the conversations are one-sided, and the voice is not truly human (merely male). Instead of upholding women’s voices and ways of knowing (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1986), the patriarchal church fails to incorporate women as dialogic and equal participants in conversations. **The limiting functions of norms established by males (Gilligan, 1982) ensure that female voices are seldom (if ever) genuinely heard or considered in high-level decision making.**

What patriarchy resists is the perspective that: ‘What a knower brings to the knowing and how a knower relates to the knowing is as important as the knowing itself’ (Thayer-Bacon, 1993, p. 323), being satisfied that male perspectives and ways of knowing are the only perspectives and knowledge worthy of consideration. Church leaders act out these conversations, or lack of them, so that it is relatively easy to depict the existence of patriarchy by noting (say) the ratio of females to males in positions of leadership (e.g., in conference or diocesan administration, churches, schools and colleges/universities, hospitals, aged care centres, etc.). The positive ratio of females to males in the membership of a patriarchal church does not translate into any advantage in the leadership domain, with substantial anomalies appearing in career aspirations and leadership participation.

The patriarchal church, as institution, and its related institutions (most particularly, its theological and educational institutions), are organised in such a way as to reinforce the structural subordination and gender stratification of Western society, its language,

and its media, in which males are defined as authorities and women as subordinates, women's contributions are marginalised, and the church processes make the male normative. **Erroneous but influential myths, such as the 'men from Mars: women from Venus' myth, popularise the gender divide, and obfuscate the actuality of similar intra- as well as inter-variation between the sexes (Cameron, 2007). As such, the patriarchal church continues to be a powerful agent of socialisation into gender differentiation and inequality for women.**

Patriarchy in the church works within a context of alleged freedom, but for women it is most often in a context of negative freedom. **Negative freedom may be defined as an absence of deliberate interference by others in an area of choice, but where other constraints act in such a way as to hinder or prevent a positive choice being made.** Positive freedom has more to do with self-realisation and self-actualisation. In a context of positive and negative freedoms, conventional patriarchal church practices reinforce the status quo and make it more difficult for women and girls to exercise the negative freedoms open to them. For example, in a situation where a young woman's gender identity was under threat, she would likely reject any work or leadership identity that would threaten her more. She would claim safety within her male-determined gendered roles, work choices and career aspirations, actually believing (wrongly) or deceiving herself (Barnes, 2007) that she had acted as a free agent. Her rewards, in behaviourist terms, (e.g., approval and security for her compliant behaviour) by the malestream church, would appear attractive to socially gendered women.

There are specific ways in which patriarchy systematically discriminates. The following are but a few exemplars of these ways, adapted from Thiele's (1986) groundbreaking work. First, **it excludes.** From the exclusiveness of a hierarchical boys' club, women are not considered to be on the same human level as men, so that, in the main, they are disregarded when it comes to issues of significant consequence. Should a woman somehow initially be included, there is every likelihood that she will later be excluded. For example, a competent woman may complete high-level work, then be sidelined and excluded once the difficult task is done; or a woman may work or initiate a major project on a voluntary basis, only to be superseded by a male being paid to do the same work. Males receive the benefits of her work, but she herself is devalued, sidelined, and finally excluded from consultation, decision-making, and leadership. **Patriarchy stands by the principle that it is better to have mediocre men than talented women in leadership positions. Women's power and success are threatening to the masculinist status quo, and the discursive practices of patriarchy may be seen to emanate from a fear of losing control.**

Second, **it marginalises.** In a normative malecentric church, exceptional women (e.g., Ellen G White) are positioned as incidental special cases (in this case, a prophet) who do not fit into their proper, natural, subordinate caring roles. They constantly battle the unwritten rules of masculinist subversive game playing by religious leadership and co-workers, inclusive of such practices as micromanagement, misleading information, self-promotion, adversarial competitiveness, restructuring, sidelining, off-loading blame, taking credit for the ideas and work of others, criticism, mistrust and strategic lies. The male leadership mistakenly assume that their decisions are superior - more enlightened - to that of females, and cannot see the value in consulting with intelligent and talented women. The 'white knight = religious head'

syndrome has males believing that females within the church are in need of help, protection, and rescue by males (the Cinderella complex).

A disingenuous excuse often used by global patriarchal churches to favour men in positions of leadership, affirms that women cannot be placed in leadership positions because some male-dominated cultures would not accept this situation. Critiquing the absurdity of this rationale is outside the limited scope of this paper, but suffice to say that if such churches acted on this rationale in other areas of church organisation and practice, there would be very little progress in any direction – the status quo would always be the lowest common denominator, a situation that obviously does not reflect current empirical practice in Western democratic churches.

Third, **it alienates**. Though there may be elegantly crafted politically correct language suggesting that women have the freedom to choose their roles and occupations, **it is not expected that women will fully exercise this freedom**, particularly if it is a role or occupation superior or equal to that of male leadership. This fiction of a freedom is produced in a political order that disguises the oppression required to produce the ‘conforming woman’ who imagines herself free to act as she chooses. **Should women, however, actually chose to pursue a serious leadership role, they then inevitably will suffer the consequences of upsetting the masculinist competitive hegemony, leading to some form of alienation and removal from power**. In the context of the androcentric society in which Jesus lived (but contrary to the teachings of Jesus), men were considered to be the essential human, while women were considered to be other than essentially human, that is, incidental and different.

Finally, **it often trivialises**. Women’s work is trivialised and considered to be inferior to men’s work, because women do it. In an androcentric religious society, if a woman somehow does progress to a position of ‘leadership’, it usually focuses on some ‘safe’ form of caring or prayer ministry, protected under the dominance of the male hierarchy. **Irrespective of the position held, the male hierarchy continues to treat women in leadership as ‘secretary’ rather than ‘leader’**. For any positions of actual power, **patriarchy tends to reward the best male competitors (self-promoting, self-serving, and adept at game playing), rather than the most competent male leaders; but, nevertheless, the pool of contenders remains comprehensively male**. Men’s work is not to be trivialised by having women do it, even women who may be far more competent than the best male contender.

Contesting Patriarchy in the Christian Church: Reversing the Silence – Telling the Church What It Needs to Hear

These patriarchal attitudes and practices are insulting to most contemporary women, and profoundly unethical, particularly in any organisation that professes to be Christian - it would be beneficial to delineate a range of game-plays by ‘religious’ men as to how they manipulate the workplace and social processes (e.g., Segal, 1997) to ‘keep women in their place.’ It is outside the limited scope of this paper, however, to do so. Suffice to say that men with these attitudes are keen to show courage in protecting and rescuing women, but are more reticent when it comes to promoting women into genuine leadership positions.

One telling consequence of this practice is the **limited number of role models and mentors** for women aspiring to be leaders within the church. This consequence of

gender bias is not helped, as noted by Miley (2002), by ‘the extent to which many church women collaborate in it’ (p. 93). Though women form over half of the church membership, they *collectively* do not actively challenge discrimination, and live in silence. Many women in the Church, by their silence, endorse disempowerment, inequality and co-dependency (e.g., Crosby, 1991), even in those denominations that have a Women’s Ministries Department or equivalent. Women passively endorse the ideology of the dominant group that perpetuates inequality and subordination, and seek success through the dominant group rather than their own individual success (Jost & Banaji, 1994).

Gramsci’s (1971) concept of hegemony further explains this phenomenon, wherein one group of people (in this case, men) or a way of thinking (in this case, the church) is so dominant that it is considered to be the natural state of affairs, and any who think contrariwise are considered to be abnormal (e.g., deviant). In this context, it is noteworthy that Christ himself was considered to be abnormal. Consequently, women who accept that “what is” is the norm, continue to discipline themselves to support male-oriented policies and practices which are actually harmful to themselves as persons and as church members, and encourage (even pressure) girls and young women to ‘conform to the norm’.

An increasing number of women (and educated young people both male and female), however, see ecclesial patriarchy as a system antithetical to the life and teachings of Jesus Christ, and spiritually destructive to both men and women. Consequently, as evidenced by the declining number of people – particularly those under 40 years of age - in many church denominations, they are finding more satisfaction and honesty outside the organisational (mainly hierarchical) institutional Church. It is alien to the creative and transformative power of God, so needed in the Christian Church today. It involves **overt**, as well as what Swim and Cohen (1997) describe as **covert sexism** (when individuals behave in a sexist manner because they know that they are safe from any social retribution), **subtle sexism** (when traditional gender roles are assumed to be a cultural or theological mandate and are thereby justified), and **hostile sexism**, **benevolent sexism** and **ambivalent sexism** (Glick & Fiske, 1996; 1999; 2001; Glick & Sakalli-Ugurlu, 2002). Hostile sexism is motivated by a hostility and angst based on gender. **Benevolent or benign sexism is motivated by feelings of affection and concern dependent on prescribed gender roles being followed.** Ambivalent sexism is motivated by a positive correlation between hostile and benevolent sexism, two sexismisms that superficially appear to be based on different motivations.

As Miley (2002, p. 88) noted, the theology emanating from patriarchy is prejudice, pure and simple, not only in terms of women’s ordination and leadership positions, but in terms of the role of human persons (Kaye, 1995). If the church fails to realise and acknowledge this deep-seated hypocrisy within itself (church = male leadership), and resists attempts to dismantle it, then inevitably the Church will not continue to prosper in any meaningful way in western democratic countries, most particularly those countries (e.g., Britain, USA, Australia) that have tended to accept globalisation and neo-liberalism. Neo-liberalism, in a religious social context, seeks a free market orthodoxy wherein religious individuals may freely choose from the religious supermarket of denominations, faith traditions, individual spirituality, and so forth. In fact, it is almost inevitable that the Christian Church, as far as being the Body and Bride of Christ is concerned, will continue to weaken and self-implode into an even

worse male mediocrity and female subservience than is found today, though it may continue to survive as a Spiritless post-Christian social institution. The Church, as a Christian entity, will be 'beyond patching' (Schneiders, 2004).

Towards Equality in Christian Church Leadership: Leadership Based on Merit Rather Than Maleness

Though progress toward any form of leadership is to be commended, this commendation has to be qualified by recognising that, in the context of male leadership positions, female leadership roles are effectively only pseudo-inclusive until the time when: (i) **women are able to assume any leadership position held by men – without having to clone a privileged masculinist style**, and (ii) **the women in these positions are not discriminated against because they are women**. Presence, being there, is no guarantee of a meaningful visibility of women, or of equitable treatment by men (Thiele, 1986). **Until discriminatory attitudes and practices are removed, positioning women alongside men in ecclesial or religious institutional leadership positions of any patriarchal religious society or institution may be profoundly challenging to the male leadership, and to those woman who support patriarchy.**

Peters (2004), in her study (as for many other studies), refers to the exhaustion of the **lone female**, normally with a huge workload (as compared to her male counterparts) working in a covert and overt hostile environment. **The singular number (woman) is used intentionally, because in the majority of instances any woman in a principal leadership position likely will find herself to be either the token woman, or the solitary female 'different other' working in, and oftentimes against, an insidious misogynistic organisational and administrative work culture. And when, as Peter's (2004) study demonstrated, this different other has been worn down by the constant discrimination, overwork, lack of support and encouragement, and the pervasive misogynistic work culture, she decides to leave what she experiences as a toxic environment, the male hierarchy deems the woman to be not up to the job, once again 'proving' - to themselves - that males make better leaders, and that women are inferior to males as leaders. Patriarchy has long survived by being professionally efficient in 'blaming the victim.'**

Patriarchy, as a system in the contemporary Christian Church, is a direct and continuing threat to Christ's radically inclusive teachings and reforms, and each church and faith tradition will need to engage intelligently with it. **When a system fails over half of the church membership, there is injustice, not love.** Though it is too simplistic to suggest that there are not variations and exceptions within patriarchal societies in Western countries such as Australia (Elder, 2007, chapter 3: The invisible woman) and patriarchal churches (Miley, 2002), **patriarchy itself is a reductionist, dualistic ideology with the following female and male positionings: (a) female to support others, male to be supported by others; (b) lower status church positions, higher status church leadership positions; (c) structurally subordinate, structurally dominant; (d) caring or home-sociability, homo-sociability; (d) lower general status, higher general status; (e) lower decision-making power, higher decision-making power; (f) passive, active; (g) private, public (h) few role models, many role models; (i) few mentors, many mentors; (j) negative freedoms, positive freedoms; and (k) nurturant other, powerful and controlling other.**

The True Identity of the Christian Church: What We Are not Told, but What We Should Hear and Believe

Christian Church identity cannot be fully grounded and imaged in Christ, or Kingdom-oriented, or people (rather than andro-) centric, or values driven, until, in unified shared presence, it actions through its language, stories, messages and behaviours, an organisational and administrative identity where **women are positioned equally and ideologically with men, together equally representing the imago Dei (God's image), as the Creator intended in the beginning of Earth's time and space.** For it was in the beginning that the imago Dei, represented by the unifying presence of Adam and Eve, was fractured through an error in choice. If indeed it is true that Christ and his Bride, the Christian Church, are to be a unified and unifying loving presence, then this can only be attained as the Christian Church strives to restore the imago Dei, partly represented by women and men together being fully equal and therefore fully whole (Gen. 5:1-2).

In the process of eschatology being realised, **Christ does not have a 'mere male' bride, as religious patriarchy espouses (a covert homosexual and misogynistic identity antithetical to women). The Christian Church cannot countenance this phenomenon of male homo-sociability (Burton, 1991; Elder, 2007) - supported by the dependent happy churchwife heroine - where men are attracted to other men in terms of their greater power, status, and resources, relative to what women have to offer, and women are socialised to adopt a subservient role to support and nurture the male leadership. Rather, Christ has a human (Homo sapiens) bride. Such is part of the true identity of God's contemporary Christian Church.**

The issue of women and leadership in the Christian Church provides a contemporary verification for Christian ethos and identity in modern societies, and, therefore, it is of major consequence. The patriarchal church's proclivity to remain bound to past ideological practices and cultures, and the lack of courage or understanding by its leadership to positively address the issue of patriarchy and women in leadership, needs enduring radical critiquing and contesting whenever and wherever possible, not only for the betterment of the Church, but for the general good of society.

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