



Proto-feminism in the Early Church

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Abstract

This article aims to contribute to the transformation of the modern church, which still adheres to a patriarchal hierarchy system, into an egalitarian church. It also aims to provide an understanding of the proto-feminist movement in the Early Church, so that the modern Church today can avoid schism and women do not try to create new sects outside the Church that could be heretical. This article discusses how the views of the Church Fathers in the Early Church helped to perpetuate the patriarchal hierarchy in the Church. The prohibition of women's involvement in ministry and leadership in the Early Church gave rise to the proto-feminist movement. Women started or joined sects or movements that honoured women's nature as full human beings and gave women leadership opportunities in the church. Women's struggle for gender equality, especially in the Church, has made them stronger, even though they are often considered heretics by the Church Fathers. Being labelled as a heretical movement or sect is not the main problem, the most important thing for women is to be accepted and included as servants and leaders in the sect or church.

Keywords: *Proto-Feminism; Feminism; Women; Early Church*

Introduction

Since the time of the Early Church (2nd - 5th century), the church offices and the practices of Christianity have been dominated by men. Women were denigrated and marginalised, while men were considered superior, stronger and more rational. This view of the subordination of women led to long debates among the Fathers of the Early Church, especially about the faith, the morals, the intellectuals and the nature of women in the Church. Women in the early church responded to the issue in a variety of ways, ranging from acceptance to criticism and even organising resistance.

Alister E. McGrath defines feminism as an ideology that seeks the equality of women and men as affirmed in contemporary theology and practice (McGrath, 2013, p. 202). Rosemary Radford Ruether defines feminism as a critical stance against the patriarchal gender paradigm. This paradigm concerns men as superior and dominant (rational, power) and women as inferior and subordinate (emotional,

passive) (Ruether, 2004, p. 3). In the twentieth century, the term feminism emerged in response to the difficulties faced by women in achieving gender equality. (Gamble, 2006, p. 15) In the 1970s, the feminist movement also succeeded in getting the church to accept the ordination of women, especially in the Protestant churches (Jones et al., n.d., p. 14). But long before that, there was a feminist movement in the Early Church, which I call proto-feminism.

Based on the above description, the proto-feminism referred to here is the gender equality efforts made by both women and men as a protest against the subordination of women in leadership in the Early Church. This paper is limited to the functional ecclesial role of women in the Early Church from the second to the fifth century.

A Glimpse of the Church Fathers' Views on Women in the Early Church

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza mentioned that women have been marginalized by the old Christian church which was determined by men from the beginning. Jesus was a man, the male apostles were men, and the early Christian priests, teachers and missionaries were men. All New Testament writings claim to be written by male authors, and first-century theology is referred to as the theology of the Fathers. Women don't seem to have any significance in the Early Church nor were they allowed to lead or teach (Schüssler Fiorenza, 1994, pp. 48–49).

The canonization of early Christian writings occurred during the pros and cons of women's leadership in the church. Texts and stories of women's marginalization are a product of patristic and biblical canonization processes (Schüssler Fiorenza, 1994, p. 53). Proponents of women's leadership in the church pointed to Mary Magdalene, Salome, or Martha as apostolic disciples. They suppressed the apostolic succession of prophets in the Old and New Testaments and called attention to women apostles in Romans 16, legitimized the egalitarian structure of the community concerning Galatians 3:28, and argued for the Acts of Paul and Thecla to be canonized (Schüssler Fiorenza, 1994, p. 53). However, Tertullian¹ denounced the Acts of Paul and Thecla as a fraud (Schüssler Fiorenza, 1994, p. 54). Tertullian rejected the book decades after it was written. He also explicitly condemned the implication of female leadership in the ministry of baptism (McGowan, 2014, p. 150). Although Tertullian argued that women could prophesy as long as they wore veils, Tertullian forbade women from speaking in church meetings (Dunn, 2004, p. 99).

The Orthodox Church opposes the church fathers' view that demeans women. They say that Genesis 1 is another aspect of the good creation. No matter how misguided humans are, the body is a good part of creation (Clark, 1983, p. 19) Various Gnostic sects allow women to baptize and charismatic movements are moved by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit which is a natural movement that allows women a greater role arguing that God does not discriminate between the sexes in distributing charismata, and spiritual gifts (Clark, 1983, p. 20).

Origen recognized that women could be apostles but women were not to speak in public and especially not in church meetings. Origen also restricted women's teaching to other women (Trigg, 1998, p. 273). John Chrysostom said that women in apostolic times went as missionaries to preach the gospel, but that was only because of what he called the "angelic condition" at the beginning of the church (Schüssler Fiorenza, 1994, p. 54).

The writings of the Latin and Greek church fathers reflect the time and conditions in which they lived. They found expression in their dualistic view of soul and body: God and nature, and man and

¹ Tertullian (160-225 AD) was the first theologian of the Western Church and the most prominent of the early Latin church fathers.

woman. During the period 1-590 AD, Christianity was deeply rooted in Greco-Roman culture and this period also marked a concerted effort to limit the role of women in the church (Wood, 2017, p. 5).

Statements about gender and women's priesthood in the Early Church were explicitly linked to the thinking of Tertullian and Epiphanius, so the Vatican Declaration of 1976 repeatedly affirmed the prohibition of women's ordination (Harvey & Hunter, 2008, p. 475). This suggests that women cannot be priests for systematic reasons, namely that the priesthood is a prerogative inherent in masculinity and that historically Jesus did not choose women apostles and did not ordain women (Harvey & Hunter, 2008, p. 475).

Proto-feminism's Attempt to Counter the Patriarchal Hierarchy of the Early Church

In this section I will describe the efforts made by the proto-feminist movement in the Early Church (2nd-5th centuries) to counter the patriarchal hierarchy. The movements that I will review include: Montanism sect, women teachers movement, asceticism movement, Pepuzians sect, Priscillianism sect, and Collyridians sect.

Montanism

Montanism comes from the name of its founder Montanus. Montanism is a prophetic movement that originated in Asia Minor Christianity in the late 150s or early 160s. Montanus was joined by two female apostles, namely Priscilla often referred to as Prisca and Maximilla. Montanus, the founder of Montanism, lived in Phrygia during the second century, teaching new revelations, claiming prophetic powers, and gathering many disciples, including women. Hieronymus, however, opposed Montanus and his movement. To oppose this sect, Hieronymus (342-420) described Montanus as "mutilated and castrated (*abscisum et semivirum*)" indicating Hieronymus' belief that Montanus was formerly a priest of Cybele. Hieronymus also accused Montanus of being an ambitious apostle using spiritual ecstasy, glossolalia, and prophecy to gain attention and followers (Butler, 2006, p. 10).

In the Early Church, Prisca and Maximilla were often vilified as heretics by anti-Montanism, possibly because of their many prophecies and their popularity at the time (Trevett, 1998, p. 12). Hieronymus labelled the female prophets as "babbling" or "mad" and as women who corrupted and defiled Christianity (Trevett, 1998, p. 21). Despite being accused of heresy, their ministry continued and expanded. Maximilla became a missionary in Phrygia and the village of Koumana, while Priscilla ministered in the Black Sea ports of Thrace. Both women were not spiritually dependent on Montanus but were his equals. They not only prophesied but also organized and promoted the Montanist movement (Butler, 2006, p. 11).

Montanism is described as an egalitarian movement that challenged the hierarchy that flourished in the church at the time. Montanism is also known as a movement that believes that the Holy Spirit can still speak directly to both male and female Christian communities (Miller, 2005, p. 34). Therefore, Montanism became special in the Early Church. When the power and authority of the church were increasingly in the hands of men who limited women's freedom and leadership in the church, Montanism came up with a model where women could hold ecclesiastical positions (Trevett, 1998, pp. 10-11). So, it is not surprising that many of the leaders and followers of Montanism are women.

Women as Teachers

In the early church, Priscilla who was a woman also taught including teaching men (Acts 18:1-3, 24-26). However, as the church institutionalized and absorbed the surrounding culture, it adopted a negative view of women and their leadership that already existed. So the Church Council produced a statement that restricted and prohibited women from holding the offices they previously held (Grenz &

Kjesbo, 1995, p. 40). Women were forbidden to teach in monasteries, within the family, and in the public sphere or become teachers. Hieronimus in Epistle 133 of 415 alleged that women would commit heresy (Clark, 1983, p. 160). This accusation is unfounded because when the Holy Spirit gives women the gift of prophecy to do teaching in the church including teaching men, there should be no reason to prevent women from being ordained as teachers (Grenz & Kjesbo, 1995, pp. 221–222).

The prohibition of women to teach because of heresy was challenged by some women of the Early Church, such as Macrina and Melania the Younger. Macrina (327-379) was the eldest child of a prominent Christian family in Cappadocia. Macrina founded a convent for women on her family's estate, she was also famous for her asceticism and the power of her ascetic teaching (Miller, 2005, pp. 22–23). Melania the Younger (383-439) was the granddaughter of the Roman aristocrat and ascetic Melania the Elder. Melania together with her husband Pinian built a women's and men's monastery on Jerusalem's Mount of Olives. Melania was a teacher at the first monastery for women that she founded (Miller, 2005, p. 19).

Asceticism

A less positive view of human sexuality led to a significant weakening of the role of women in the Early Church. This led to a decline in women's ministry and even pushed women into a separatist path. This led to women withdrawing to the desert or monasteries devoting themselves to prayer, and becoming ascetics in monasteries. Thus, women could engage in the ministry of the Word, the sacrament of baptism, pray and provide practical help for women and children (Witherington, 1996, p. 209).

The emergence of the asceticism movement has great significance for the history of Christian worship and spirituality. Long before the fourth century, ascetic impulses were already occurring in Christianity, those who accepted the vocation of ascetic had special authority as models for prayer (McGowan, 2014, p. 203). Many women sought solitude and prayer as a means of assurance of salvation. The pattern of prayer practised was highly influential throughout the Christian population (McGowan, 2014, p. 204).

Women undertake spiritual purification to negate their biological female function as a form of self-denial. Hieronymus said that outwardly women are different from men. However, if a woman wants to serve Christ more than the world, then she will cease to be a woman and will be called a man (Nelson, 2009, p. 159). In other words, Hieronymus wanted to emphasize that women who want to serve Christ should be virgins, although in practice ascetic women are not only virgins but also widows.

In the fourth century, virginity was praised as a means of closeness to God; this was an aspect of asceticism that Christians developed. Earlier, in the early second century, Thecla, the so-called heroine, had provided a model for women to be spiritually empowered and socially liberated by chastity. Thecla became the model for Olympias, Melanie the Younger, and Macrina (Miller, 2005, pp. 9–10). In the 350s Macrina who was Basil's elder sister Caesarea had experimented in a family hermitage that developed into 380 monastic communities. This suggests that Basil was not the earliest monastic founder in his own family and Cappadocia (Harvey & Hunter, 2008, p. 506).

Women exercise their gifts of leadership in monasteries. Many women flocked to monasteries to study, write, or simply sightsee. Ascetic women avoided pregnancy and childbirth in pursuit of holiness without expectations of marriage and family, leaving them free to govern themselves and become leaders or teachers from the start (Grenz & Kjesbo, 1995, pp. 40–41). In the mid-fourth century a group of bishops from Asia Minor and Armenia held a council in the city of Gangra, in the province of Paphlagonia in northern Asia Minor, out of concern for the extreme asceticism popularized by Eustathius a bishop of Sebaste in Armenia. The Council sought to control the practice of asceticism by rejecting the extreme Eustathian position, in which sexual relations were denied, marriage was condemned, and

monastic dress was adopted by women as well as men (Miller, 2005, p. 150). The holy synod convened in Gangra (Miller, 2005, p. 151) attempted to control extreme Euthathian practices as follows:

Canon 1: If anyone censures marriage, and loathes or censures the faithful and pious woman who sleeps with her husband, claiming she is not able to enter the kingdom, let such a one be anathema.

Canon 9: If anyone practices virginity or self-control, withdrawing from marriage as if it were a loathsome thing and not because of the inherent beauty and sanctity of virginity, let such a one be anathema.

Canon 10: If any of those who practice virginity for the Lord's sake acts arrogantly toward those who are married, let such a one be anathema.

Canon 13: If, because of presumed asceticism, any woman change her clothing, and in place of the clothing customary for women adopt that of men, let her be anathema.

Canon 14: If any woman abandons her husband and wishes to withdraw from marriage because she loathes it, let her be anathema.

Canon 17: If, because of presumed asceticism, any woman cuts her hair, which God gave as a reminder of [her] subjection, under the impression that this annuls the ordinance of subjection, let her be anathema.

However, asceticism offered women a liberating alternative and the freedom to exercise control over their own lives. The ascetic life appealed to women, as they could explore opportunities to take control of their lives and wealth and to pursue an education that was less open to women at the time (Seim, 1989, p. 137). Becoming an ascetic woman was a solution to women's liberation from the patriarchal culture that often oppressed women, both in the family and the church fathers' restrictions on women's roles in the church.

Pepuzians

The Pepuzians, also known as Quintillians, got their name from the city of Pepuza. The Pepuzians regarded the city of Pepuza as divine and called it Jerusalem (Williams, 1989, p. 343). Epiphanius says:

There are two Sections in the second Volume. And in the first Section of the second Volume—the fourth in numerical order from the beginning—there are eighteen Sects as follows: Encratites; Phrygians, also known as Montanists and Tascodrugians. But the Tascodrugians are differentiated from the (two) preceding. Pepuzians, < also known as Priscillianists > and Quintillianists, with whom Artotyrites are associated (Epiphanius, 2009, p. 6).

Although different, Pepuzians is considered a direct spiritual descendant of the Montanists.

The Pepuzians claimed that their prophet (possibly Quintilla) had seen Christ dressed as a woman who visited him in a dream in the city of Pepuza (P. Gerard, 2013, p. 12). The Pepuzians considered Jesus to have taken the form of a woman and shared a bed with their prophet. Since their prophet was a woman, they could ordain women as their bishops and priests (P. Gerard, 2013, p. 12).

Epiphanius says that the Pepuzians used both the Old and New Testaments, and also affirmed the resurrection of the dead. The Pepuzians quoted texts aimlessly and thanked Eve for being the first to eat of the tree of knowledge. As support for the ordination of women as priests, the Pepuzians said that Moses' brother was a female prophet and Philip had four daughters who prophesied (Epiphanius, 2013, p. 22).

Priscillianism

Priscillianism is a movement that originated in Spain in 370 and spread in France. Its founder was Priscillian, a layman who came from a noble family and became bishop of Avila (Gray, 2011). Priscillian's ascetic life, knowledge, wealth, and modesty made him more and more followers. Some of his followers were priests, and there were even two bishops who followed her, Instantius and Salvianus, who were later ordained as bishops in Priscillianism (Birkhaeuser, 1898, p. 219).

In 380, the Council of Saragoza condemned and cut off communication with Priscillian, while Ithasius made Emperor Gratian issue a decree to exile Priscillian. However, the edict was later revoked by Emperor Gratian as Priscillian's followers appealed to Pope Damasus and St. Ambrosius (Birkhaeuser, 1898, p. 219). As a result of the revocation of the edict, Priscillian's followers grew in Galicia, especially among women (Gray, 2011). To suppress Priscillianism, in 385 Emperor Maximus ordered the execution of its leaders (Birkhaeuser, 1898, p. 219). Finally, in 385 Priscillian was beheaded in Trier along with six of his disciples, and Priscillian became the first person executed for heresy in church history (Gray, 2011). Priscillianism disappeared from history after the second Council of Braga in 563 took steps to prevent and condemn Priscillianism (Birkhaeuser, 1898, p. 220).

Priscillian influenced on women's leadership roles that were on the move in the West in the fourth century. Gelasius and the three bishops of Gallia in the fifth century said that the practice of women serving at the altar had already taken place in the West and women had been made elders (Madigan & Osiek, 2011, p. 183). In the first Synod of Saragoza in 380, the Catholic Church forbade its congregation, especially women, to follow the Priscillians where women could preach, teach or study. According to the Catholic Church, citing Pulus' command in 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 and 1 Timothy 2:12 that women are not allowed to teach (Madigan & Osiek, 2011, p. 184).

The ecclesiastical office of women in Priscillianism was again criticized at the Gallican National Synod of Nimes in 394. The synod produced only seven short canons and was largely directed against the Priscillians. (Madigan & Osiek, 2011, p. 184). They argued that the ordination of women was inappropriate and contradictory (Madigan & Osiek, 2011, p. 185). The Priscilian attitude towards matter and the body made the genders equal in many ways. Thus, women could assume priestly roles and attain the same sacred status as the male priesthood (Madigan & Osiek, 2011, p. 185).

Collyridians

The Collyridians are a sect that considers Mary to be God. Followers of this sect were called Collyridians, because they worshipped the Virgin Mary by offering a type of 50 Gray, cake called *Collyrides* in Greek (Ligouri, 1847, p. 49). Epiphanius of Salamis (310-403) criticized the priestesses of the Collyridians sect. Epiphanius said that from Thrace and Upper Scythia to Arabia, women acted as priests. They performed rituals that resembled the Eucharist and offered a sacrifice of bread in Mary's name on a small altar and then everyone took it (Kateusz, 2013, p. 86). Epiphanius said what the Collyridians sect was doing was idolatry. Epiphanius further emphasized that although Mary is considered the most perfect creation, she is still a creation and should not be honored like God by doing special worship (Ligouri, 1847, p. 49).

Epiphanius forbids the Collyridians sect from using Mary as an example to justify women priests. Epiphanius' repeated prohibition of women as priests shows that the followers of the Collyridians sect used Mary's example for female leadership (Kateusz, 2013, p. 88). However, not all Christians at the time agreed with Epiphanius' statement calling the Collyridians a heretical sect, as early Christians also honored saints and martyrs (Stephen J. Shoemaker, 2008, p. 374). Epiphanius' view of the Collyridians suggests the existence of a Marian cult in the broader context of veneration of the saints in 370 (Stephen J. Shoemaker, 2008, p. 378). Although Epiphanius condemns the Collyridians sect of Marian veneration,

by the fifth century, half a century after the existence of the Collyridians sect, it is said that mainstream Christianity also venerated saints (Stephen J. Shoemaker, 2008, p. 385).

The Collyridians story confirms that there was discrimination against women in ecclesiastical ministry and office. In the writings of Epiphanius, it is affirmed that women were strictly forbidden to take part in women's ministry and leadership. The followers of the Collyridian sect highly revere Mary as the model for women's leadership in this sect. The desire for women to be involved in ministry and leadership in the church was so high that the sect attracted many women despite the tremendous pressure from mainstream Christianity, especially from Epiphanius.

Conclusion

Feminists argue that the church fathers have erroneously defined the status of women which in turn has limited women's leadership in the church. Women were not only blamed for sin but also viewed by the church fathers as weaker, inferior and creatures of lust (Wood, 2017, p. 5). Thus, the movement for women's equality in leadership in the church, which I call proto-feminism, asserts that women have equal rights and abilities in leading the church. The Early Church and the church fathers looked down upon and rejected women's leadership in the church. This proto-feminism movement shows that sects or churches led by women are growing both in terms of followers and areas of service.

The history of the proto-feminism movement in the Early Church shows that women never uttered the sword in their narratives. They demonstrated a way of life with chastity that exemplified wisdom and was as important as their prophetic knowledge (Lehtipuu & Dunderberg, 2017, p. 4). The Montanists, Priscilians, Pepuzians and Collyridians have shown that women's knowledge was highly valued and women were allowed to hold authority.

The issue of women's subordination can still be found from the ancient church to the modern church today. The percentage of women leaders in the church is not equal to that of men, even though there are churches that accept women's leadership. If you pay attention to the number of attendees of the female members of the congregation, there are more women than men in every worship service. Therefore, the church needs to improve by opening the widest possible space for women's leadership in the church. The role of women is very important for the sustainability of the church. In my opinion, this article contributes to the transformation of the modern church, which still adheres to a patriarchal hierarchy system, into an equal church. The church has also gained an understanding of the proto-feminist movement in the ancient church so that today's modern church can avoid division. Finally, there has been no attempt by women to be the founders of new sects outside the church which could be heretical.

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