Any faith that puts men above women is a misguided faith

Abstract

Studies show that although beliefs do not cause violence against women they matter. Certain beliefs provide an environment where perpetrators find it possible to justify their behavior through distortion or extension of religious teachings. Conversely, religious beliefs and practices also serve as protective factors against intimate partner violence. Continued progress is needed toward the development of faith based violence prevention approaches, which include raising awareness among religious leaders about how religious beliefs impact their members’ personal safety.

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Since the early 1990s the avalanche of abuse complaints flowing from Australian Churches and a number of faith based welfare institutions have shaken the country to its highest levels. The control mechanisms used by certain Christian institutions, to both justify perpetrated abuse and limit survivors’ options is astounding. So why the grave moral error in judgement; what went so badly wrong?

Definitive explanations on the causes of institutional violence against women in particular have been illusive, research in this area has not yielded firm conclusions. That said, a strong link between perpetration of violence against women and religious prescriptions of disproportionate power, more particularly cultural norms related to male authority and female submission, is frequently asserted in both the religious and secular literature.

In a 2007 study by Nancy Nason-Clark, a sample of Anglican Clergy, defined intimate partner violence as emotionally abusive and controlling behaviour by men over women.

One cleric observed ‘Women are at the receiving end of that violence and it is the norm and the pattern that males are the
perpetrators of violence at home.’ Another said, ‘It’s mostly the men that are abusing the women—their wives.’

At its core, violence against women, and the threat of it, is most often used to exert power and control over others. It is one of the many visible and experienced realities of gender inequality manifest by, put downs, exclusions from participating in events, manipulations and game playing, unilateral decision making, threats, beatings ecetera.

Though religious beliefs do not cause violence against women they can further solidify cultural endorsement of rigid gender ideologies that support male dominance and female submissiveness.

Numerous studies report that by its silence or its instruction the Church has communicated to women of faith that they should stay in abusive relationships, try to be better wives, and “forgive and forget.” (Fortune et als. 2005, Potter 2007; Bent & Goodley et. als. 2012). As well, delivered sermons that speak without nuance of the virtue of ‘submitting to the will of God,’ for example, or of the way in which ‘God sends us suffering to test our faith,’(Tkacz 2006). To perpetrators they say, the Church has communicated that their efforts to control their wives or girlfriends are justified because women are to be subject to men in all things (Ephesians 5:22-24, NRSV).

Far too often, the impact of these distortions of Scripture have been non-reporting, silence or denial of the problem.

One clergy person said to me recently ‘violence against women no, not in my parish.’

Non-reporting or silence was also interpreted by another as ‘no problem exists,’ ‘No one comes to me; he said, ‘so if no one comes to me how do I know it exists?’

Denial and silence about domestic violence, as well as violence more generally, immobilise women and faith communities from acknowledging and challenging the abuse in their relationships and moving towards safety. As well, silence inadvertently, encourages the behaviour of the perpetrator; faith communities are complicit.

The good news is that no reasonable Christian could claim that women's inherent inferiority, is derived from the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. I need only cite, Jesus encounter with the Woman at the Well (John 4: 16-27, NRSV) and with the Syrophoenician woman
(Mark 7: 25-30, NRSV). These are two primitive Christian expressions of a more egalitarian countercultural trend against the patriarchal culture of the times. In the prophetic/charismatic foundational age of Christianity individual women had particularly close access to Jesus and played important active roles which break with the patriarchal relations of their respective socio-historical contexts.

This means that any understanding of Christianity’s role in the lives of women and men is incomplete if our sacred texts are understood as simply endorsing the rule of men over women.

Working alongside women of faith, who have survived violence and now actively work to prevent violence from occurring in the first place, it is important to note that they are not passive victims. On the contrary, they have discovered for themselves, liberative Biblical texts and spiritual practices that affirm their equal worth before God and that is why they continue to be active members of their local parish.

Their personal response to stopping violence is supported by an ever expanding range of violence prevention strategies used by faith communities to respond to, and prevent violence against women. Such strategies include, for example, using the Bible as an alternate ideological context to subvert oppressive, hierarchical teaching (Nash 2006; Potter 2007; Nash & Hesterberg 2009); reinterpreting religious beliefs, (Knickmeyer et al., 2010), the use of prayer (Sharp 2010), drawing on specific scriptural references or characters (Nash & Heterberg, 2009), validating and empowering women (Homiak & Singletary, 2007); seeking partners who have similar religious and spiritual values (Higginbotham et al.s., 2007), religious leaders using the language of their faith to condemn violence against women and/or challenging gender discriminatory practices (Kroeger et al.s., 2008 Skiff et al.s., 2008). As well, attending to the difficulties that female leadership has in ministering in a context which justifies the superiority of men (Bouclin 2006; Ternier-Gommers, 2007).

A conclusion drawn easily from my work with parishes is a need for a renewal in our hearts and minds where the Christian ethic of mutual, equal respect are emphasised.
Christian leaders must continue to raise the consciousness of their congregations and speak the good news that patriarchy robs us of - there is simply no gender discrimination in the eyes of God.

References


