Looking Under the Skirts of Theology: Roman Catholic and Mormon Women Team Up in Support of Women Priests

Roman Catholic and Mormon women met in Berkeley, California last Saturday, March 16th, to advocate for women's inclusion in the governance of their respective churches. Hosted by the Sunstone Education Foundation, the panel featured women from both traditions who value their religious communities and share a common mission, namely, to advocate for practical, equitable, and inclusive change, including the ordination of women.

Berkeley, CA (PRWEB) March 21, 2013 -- While the Roman Curia contemplated the future of the Church under Pope Francis and the all-male hierarchy of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints prepared for their semi-annual General Conference, Roman Catholic and Mormon women teamed up in Berkeley, California on Saturday, March 16, to advocate for women's inclusion in the governance of their respective churches. The panel, hosted by the Sunstone Education Foundation, featured women from both traditions who value their religious communities but are troubled by their exclusion from ecclesiastical and ritual authority. Having met at a previous dialogue sponsored by the Women's Studies in Religion Program at Claremont Graduate University, they share a common mission, namely, to advocate for practical, equitable, and inclusive change, including the ordination of women.

In her introduction to the panel, Sunstone director of symposia Mary Ellen Robertson spoke frankly: "If I see a flaw in contemporary Mormon feminism, it's that we haven't ventured outside our own religious community to partner with other religious feminist activists. Working separately or in ignorance of the work already done by other religious feminists, we're more likely to spend time reinventing the wheel than building upon the lessons learned."

"Fortunately," Robertson continued, "there's an exciting shift afoot. Catholic and Mormon women are having dialogues about women's ordination and examining the theological and cultural assumptions upon which an all-male priesthood rests."

Roman Catholic Woman Priest Victoria Rue called for a transformation in the way Catholics view priesthood: "Bottom line, both male and female can represent, and must represent Christ. And if we look under the skirts of theology, we may find that all sexualities can represent . . . the ordination of women is not simply pouring women into cassocks. Women's ordination upsets and transforms the status quo."

Representing the Mormon tradition, Lorie Winder offered a theological argument for women's ordination and questioned why women who advocate for ordination are stigmatized: "Those who accuse women of being power-hungry if they advocate for women's ordination fail to recognize that in Mormonism, spiritual empowerment is the sum of God's hope for us as men and women. There is no shame nor are there accusations of improper ambition attached to a 12-year-old boy in the Church who aspires to priesthood ordination. In fact, in a church where all men are ordained, it often is applauded. Why, then, are women's aspirations for ordination suspect?"

"Mormon history and theology provide one of the strongest justifications for women’s priesthood ordination in the history of Western religions," noted Margaret Toscano, a scholar of myth, Mormonism, religion and gender. "Joseph Smith announced to the Mormon women of his day that he intended to make them a 'kingdom of
priests' . . . We were called to this mission in 1842, six years before the famous Seneca Falls conference that led the way in women’s rights in this country. We should have been in the vanguard advocating women’s ordination; instead we have dragged far behind in promoting women’s equality in all arenas of life."

Speaking from a personal perspective, Christine Haider-Winnett, Co-President of the Women's Ordination Conference, told why such interfaith dialogues were particularly important to her: "When I was a teenager, I left the Catholic Church, and later Christianity, for about 10 years over issues of women’s ordination and sexism. When I first started to return to my roots, I desperately sought out any Christian approach to the divine feminine that I could find. Those first resources that I found weren’t Catholic depictions of Sophia, but Mormon stories and hymns about the Heavenly Mother. She played a very important role in helping me find my way back to my Catholic faith. For me, that’s just one example of how much we have to learn from each other, and how much we all have to gain from these sorts of conversations."

The panel was part of the 2013 Sunstone West Symposium held at the Pacific School of Religion on the campus of the Graduate Theological Union. It was moderated by Todd Compton, PhD, Classics, UCLA and an independent historian of Mormonism, and introduced by Mary Ellen Robertson, MA, Women's Studies in Religion, Claremont Graduate University.

About the panelists:

MARGARET TOSCANO, an assistant professor of classics and comparative literature at the University of Utah, where she also received her PhD and works on topics relating to myth, religion, and gender. She is also a co-founder of the Mormon Women’s Forum.

CHRISTINE HAIDER-WINNETT, Co-President of the Women's Ordination Conference, the world's oldest and largest organization working primarily for women's equality in the Roman Catholic Church. Christine is currently pursuing a Masters in Divinity at Pacific School of Religion, and a certificate in Women's Studies in Religion at the Graduate Theological Union.

LORIE WINDER, MA, Humanities, Brigham Young University and former editor, Mormon Women's Forum Quarterly.

About The Sunstone Education Foundation:
The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is a vibrant religious tradition with a diverse membership. The Sunstone Education Foundation, though an independent organization without official ties to the LDS Church, offers a forum for the discussion of contemporary scholarship, literature, and social issues related to Mormonism. It brings together traditional and non-traditional Latter-day Saints, promoting an atmosphere that values faith and intellectual and experiential integrity.
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