



Reconciling Black And White? The Compatibility Of Christianity And Feminism In Churches In Masvingo Urban, Zimbabwe

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Abstract:

The study was undertaken to establish the relationship between two ideologies that have gained momentum in recent years which are Christianity and Feminism. The researchers were motivated to carry out this study by a number of factors inter-alia the rising number of people turning to Christianity in Zimbabwe and the corresponding increase in gender advocacy spearheaded by governmental and non-governmental organisations. The two ideologies seem to represent conflicting principles. It was against this backdrop that the researchers undertook this study to establish the compatibility of the two ideologies. The liberal reformist feminist perspective informed the study. A sample of 120 Christians was purposively drawn from a population of 1200 respondents. Data was collected from the participants through semi-structured interviews, observations and documentary analysis. The researchers established that the majority of the respondents embraced feminist ideology in the public sphere except in the church. The study also revealed that men dominated in leadership positions in the church. Based on the findings of the study, the researchers recommended that gender advocacy groups should target churches and that women should be accorded the opportunity to take up leadership positions in churches.

Key words: *Feminism, Christianity, compatibility, patriarchy, church, gender advocacy*

1. Background To The Study

Christianity is embraced by the majority of the Zimbabwean population members. According to research studies, Zimbabwe is a Christian nation with over 85% of the population believing in the Christian faith (<http://www.Zimbabwe.cc/html/Christianity>). The Evangelical denominations of Pentecostal churches and Apostolic groups were the fastest growing religious groups in the period 2000-2009 (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religion-in-Zimbabwe>). The Christian behaviour and hence male-female relationships are guided by the biblical teachings. Kasomo (2010:126) posits that the theme of the woman is a particularly disputed subject in contemporary theological, social and political fronts. Sweetman (2007) observes that religious teaching preaches women's subordination through imposing social codes regarding women's roles, behaviour and relationships with men. Religion prescribes codes of behaviour in the family and beyond. It is important to note that the phenomenal rise in Christian religious groups in Zimbabwe has been paralleled by an upsurge of gender advocacy groups, advocating for equality between men and women in all spheres of life. The two ideologies namely Christianity and feminism appear to espouse conflicting ideas. In view of the fact that 85% of the Zimbabwean population are Christians, there is a high probability that some of the advocates of gender equality are Christians. Walter (1990:73) argues that one of the most obvious attributes of most churches is that they attract more women than men. If this turns out to be true, one is then tempted to wonder how feminism can be reconciled with Christianity. This study therefore attempts to unravel the relationship between the two ideologies.

Retracing our footsteps, we gathered that the subject of feminism has a long history and has captured the attention of many prominent figures one of whom is Karen Honey. A neo-Freudian by profession, Karen Horney advanced ideas which became a foundation of many feminist principles (Feldman, 2009:454). This is backed by Jones (2006) and Eckardt (2005) in Feldman (2009: 454) who indicate that Horney's conceptualisations which she developed in the 1930s and 1940s essentially became the bedrock of many of the fundamental ideas of feminism which gained momentum several decades later.

According to Kosslyn and Rosenberg (2006:486) and Lahey (2009:420), Horney argued that the differences between men and women do not wholly lie on their anatomy,

masculinity and femininity, but on the power and privileges which the society accords males. For instance, in the traditional African society, women were habitually used and handled like personal property of men, exploited, oppressed and degraded as portrayed in a number of African proverbial statements (Kasomo, 2010:128). The patriarchal nature of society can be deduced from statements such as the one made by Aristotle, a prominent Greek philosopher, who remarked, "The female is a male which for some accidental reason did not attain its full development"(Kasomo, 2010:127). Feldman (2009:454) says, "She (Horney) suggested that society's rigid gender roles for women lead them to experience ambivalence about success, fearing that they will make enemies if they are too successful". This is backed by Kasomo (2010:129) who reiterates that women's low self-esteem causes them to underrate themselves and leave leadership roles to men.

Carl Gustav Jung is a neo-psychoanalyst who differed with Freud on many things one of which is spirituality. As a result of being influenced by his family background in which his father was a pastor, Jung developed his analytical psychology with spirituality as one of the key concepts. Lahey (2009:418) claims that Jung proposed that human beings have a spiritual force in their collective unconscious. By definition, the collective unconscious is, according to Jung, the universal set of beliefs, ideas, feelings and attitudes which human beings are born with (Lahey, 2009:418). Oehman and Mineka (2003) and Hauke (2006) in Feldman (2009:453) point out that belief in a supreme being is a universal human attribute which resides in the collective unconscious. Meyer, Moore and Viljoen (1997:101) point out that Jung postulates that human beings are generally oriented towards a perpetual creative development in striving to achieve a complete self as a result of the religious spiritual drive which is inherent in all human beings. It was through considering the inherent nature of spirituality and also the long history of feminism that the researchers delved in a study to establish the compatibility of the seemingly antagonistic concepts.

2.Christian View On Male And Female Relationships

Christians uphold the teachings of the Bible which feminist theologians castigated as patriarchal through and through. According to Christian beliefs, the church functions much better when all members participate. They believe that it is God's order that women be submissive to their husbands. Scriptures that support domination and subordination relations between men and women are abound in the Bible. Examples

include 1 Peter 3 which commands, “Wives in the same way be submissive to your husbandsSarah obeyed Abraham and called him her Master”. 1 Timothy 2 verses 12 – 13 say, “I do not permit a woman to teach or have authority over man; she must be silent”. Many Christian organisations encourage men to take up leadership positions to avoid the sins of ‘religious feminism’

(<http://www.forourlordjesuschrist.org/Gateways/Feminism>). However, it is worth noting that despite the seemingly patriarchal nature of the Bible, women also played significant roles in the Bible. For instance, as written in Judges 4 verses 4-5, Deborah became a judge who even presided over cases involving all the people, both male and female (Kasomo, 2010:138). Moreover, the biblical Esther masterminded the rescue of the Jews when they were under siege from Haman (the whole book of Esther in the Bible). The situation in Zimbabwe is complicated since the majority of the population, that is, 85%, are Christians but at the same time feminism is embraced by a sizeable proportion of the population. What are the chances of feminism prevailing in a Christian nation? Can one be both a Christian and a feminist? This is the problem that the researchers endeavoured to answer. In her book entitled *Being Feminist Being Christian*, Melanie Springer pointed out that one cannot simultaneously be a Christian and a feminist since the latter undermines the very foundations of faith in Jesus Christ by contracting biblical truths and Church tradition (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Daphne-Hampson>).

3.Feminist Theologians’ Views On The Role Of Women

The point of departure of feminist theologians is women’s experience and a rejection of patriarchy. Daphne Hampson, one of the leading feminist theologians, argues that the Bible is a patriarchal text through and through (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Daphne-Hampson>). Some feminist theologians regard the whole text as toxic. Feminist theology began in the 19th century. During this period, equal rights for women were demanded in terms of education, employment and the law. This also triggered demands for equal rights in the church. The critical principle for feminist theology is the promotion of full humanity of women. To feminist theologians, whatever denies or distorts the full humanity of women is appraised as not redemptive. Thus, Schussler-Fiorenza (1994) advocates for critical interpretation of the Bible that secures justice and freedom for all. She adds that Bible interpretation is a tool for becoming aware of the structures of domination which must be abolished. Feminist theologians view themselves not as mere

academics but as part of a social movement for emancipation. They maintain that any interpretation must be judged as to “whether it is empowering to both men and women in their struggle for survival and transformation”. It is this feminist ideology with an emphasis on equality between men and women that has gained momentum in the face of an increase in popularity of Christianity in Zimbabwe that motivated the researchers to explore the compatibility of the two ideologies.

Daphene Hampson asserts that Christianity cannot be moral because it is sexist. She further castigates Christianity as a brilliant, subtle, elaborate, male cultural projection calculated to legitimise a patriarchal world (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Daphene-Hampson>). This tallies with the views of Karen Horney as outlined earlier. Waller in Sweetman (2007) argues that churches interpret human nature in a manner that is damaging to women.

Feminist theologians argue that churches are run by men and that leadership is largely in men’s hands. In the same view, Menchn, a Guatemalan revolutionary leader advocates for a church of the people, organised by them and reflecting their experiences. He adds that a church is more than a building; it is a real change within people. The change he advocated for should address the relations between women and men and the machismo which is likened to a sickness (Sweetman, 2007). Research done in America found out that in the Christian based communities of Latin America, women are represented in big numbers in the structure and organisation of the church. Women are also free to read and reflect on the Bible from their own experience (Sweetman, 2007). Pew Forum (2007) points out that research statistics from Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa seem to indicate that women in Pentecostal and charismatic churches are more likely to be involved in women’s groups than women belonging to other Christian denominations. According to Mwaura (1997) women the world over have evolved into spiritual pillars who witness to the image of God within them and the hope and renewal for the Church rests within this witness. Some feminist theologians argue that men have used religion to serve their patriarchal purposes hence demand that a more women-friendly tradition should be reclaimed. They argued that the early Christians lived in an egalitarian community of women and men and those women were allowed to hold positions. This study was carried out to find out the situation that obtains in churches in Masvingo urban against the backdrop of the increase in gender advocacy.

4.Theoretical Framework

The study was informed by the feminist theory namely liberal feminism. Liberal feminists campaign for equal rights for women within the framework of the liberal state. Liberal feminists uphold that the state is benign and that it should see to it that the rights and privileges it confers to men are extended to woman to give them equal citizenship with men (Freedman, 2001). They also argue that given equal treatment, men and women will treat each other as equals (Schaefer, 2010).

5.Methodology

5.1.Research Design

The research design adopted for this study is descriptive survey. According to Lahey (2009:28) the descriptive survey research design is one in which the respondents' opinions, attitudes, sentiments are obtained mostly through interviews and questionnaires. Feldman (2009:49) defines a survey as a, "research in which people who are chosen to represent a larger population are asked to a series of questions about their behaviour, thoughts and attitudes". The design was found appropriate since the researchers wanted to collect data from a relatively big sample. According to Lahey (2009:28), descriptive surveys basically focus on studying people's lives in such a way that it becomes feasible to describe their behaviour and mental processes. In this regard, Haralambos and Holborn (2010: 82) contend that data can be collected from a large sample in a short period through survey methods.

5.2.Population, Sample And Sampling Procedure

Shastri (2008) defines a population as an entire group of persons or elements that have at least one thing in common. A sample is a small group of people or elements selected from the total population. From a population of 1200 congregation members of various denominations in Masvingo urban, a sample of 120 respondents was chosen using the purposive sampling method. Regarding the distribution of the sample members by gender, 80 of them were female while 40 were male. Of the 80 female respondents, 50 were married, widowed or divorced while the other 30 were single and were youths in church. Of the 40 male respondents, 20 were married adults while the other 20 were single young adults. This proportion was reflective of the gender distribution of the entire population where there were more females than males. Purposive sampling was

adopted by the researchers in order to come up with a sample comprising different age groups and gender. According to Chiromo (2006:18) purposive sampling, which is also called judgemental sampling, is a sampling procedure in which the researcher uses his or her judgement to select respondents on the basis of their typicality. Characteristically, the sample members had a mean age of 36.5 years with a standard deviation of 7.2 years.

5.3. Instrumentation

Data was collected from the participants through semi-structured interviews, observations and documentary analysis. Nyawaranda (2003) in Kufakunesu (2011:31) views a face-to-face interview as a dialogue between a researcher and a research informant in which the researcher collects information for research. Semi-structured interviews were used because they enabled the researchers to make a follow up on any relevant leads which emerged from the conversations (Nyawaranda, 2003; Kufakunesu, 2011: 31). This enabled the researchers to remain focused on pertinent issues while simultaneously pursuing any relevant lead which emanated from the interview sessions. According to Makore-Rukuni (2001) observation as a research instrument is one in which a well trained researcher assesses individuals in their natural settings (Kufakunesu, 2011:33). In justifying the use of the observation method, Kufakunesu (2011:33) points out that observations enable the researchers to establish if the respondents' verbal contributions agree with their actions on the ground. The analysis of the tangible church programmes and documents was also done in a bid to gather ample information pertaining to the study.

5.4. Ethical Considerations

In a bid to protect the research respondents and the fraternity of researchers, the researchers observed some ethical principles. Anonymity, privacy and informed consent were taken heed of by the researchers. According to Chiromo (2006:11) privacy has to do with the respondents' right to choose the extent to and the manner in which they will disclose or withhold information pertaining to their behaviour, attitudes or opinions. Keenan (2002:66) defines informed consent as, "an agreement by a participant to take part in a research project based on a full understanding of the nature of the project". Feldman (2009:49) views informed consent as, "a document signed by participants affirming that they have been told the basic outlines of the study and are aware of what their participation will involve". The respondents agreed to participate in the study after

the researchers have furnished them with information pertaining to the purpose of the study and their rights as researcher informants, including their freedom to prematurely withdraw from the study. The exact names of both the respondents and the churches were not mentioned for the sake of anonymity.

5.4. Research Findings

The findings of the study are as follows:

- The majority of the participants embraced the feminist ideology in the public sphere in general except in the church.
- There was isolation and precariousness of women in church activities.
- The youths, both boys and girls, expressed more favourable attitudes towards gender equality in the church than adults.
- Men dominated in leadership positions in the church.

6. Discussion Of Results

The study found out that 100 (83%) of the participants, both men and women, supported the feminist ideology of equality between men and women in general but expressed reservations when it relates to the church and the private sphere. The participants expressed favourable attitudes towards gender equality in education and workplaces and indicated that some of them belonged to gender advocacy groups in their workplaces. In interrogating why the participants were sceptical of feminist ideology in the church and the private sphere, the participants cited the doctrine as their inspiration. Some male participants pointed out that equality of men and women was against God and nature. This observation is in line with the views of Oduyoye (1995, 2000), a theologian from Ghana, who commented that African men fervently respond positively when people talk about racial and class exploitation but can hang you if you dare talk about sexism (Sweetman, 2007). According to Kasomo (2010:128) one African Theologian, Oduyoye (1995) laments the manner in which women fall victim to linguistic imagery that compels them to accept the patriarchal nature of society as a result of the commonly used proverbs. Nwachukwu (1992) and Ndeda (1997:19) claim that one argument against women officiating in a worship service let alone holding the position of priest is that she sometimes becomes ceremonially unclean through menstruating. One male respondent expressed his views against putting women in leadership positions by saying:

Biblically speaking, women have been the line of least resistance. For instance, the serpent deceived Eve, not Adam, into eating the fruit of the forbidden tree (Genesis 3 verses 1-6 and 1 Timothy 2 v 14). Moreover, Portiphar's wife went out of her way in trying to be intimate with Joseph (Genesis 39 verses 7- 18). The emotional nature of women can be a letdown in the church. In opposition to the above remarks, one female research participant says:

Women can make very meaningful contributions in church when they are given the opportunity to lead. Even during the days of Jesus Christ, women played significant roles in the ministry. The Bible says in Matthew 27 verse 55, "Many women were there, watching from a distance. They had followed Jesus from Galilee to care for his needs".

The issue of equality between men and women in the church is viewed as devilish thus Christian feminists are regarded as dangerous when they question patriarchal structures in the church. Gender equality is viewed as destructive of relationships in the family, church and all that is sacred. The participants' attitudes of denying equality between men and women in the church are also in agreement with feminist post-biblical theologians who are comfortable with differences between sexes. On the other hand, this finding is contradictory to the liberal reformists' stance, who advocate for equal opportunities in the church ([http://www.theologynetwork.org/theology-of-everything/on overview of feminist-theology.htm](http://www.theologynetwork.org/theology-of-everything/on%20overview%20of%20feminist-theology.htm)).

The study also revealed the isolation and precariousness of women in church activities. 60 out of the 80 (75%) of the female participants concurred that their male counterparts relegated them to less important roles in the church like sweeping and decorating the church. Documentary analysis of the sampled church programmes revealed that the main activities of the church like presiding over the service, baptising new converts, preaching and leading in the taking of the holy communion were assigned to men. The documentary evidence was corroborated by observational results which also revealed that church activities were dominated by men despite the fact that males are numerically less than females in virtually all denominations. The situation of women in churches studied in Masvingo urban by the researchers is commensurate with Cath Elliot, Susan Anthony and Helan Gardener's views on Christianity and feminism. Cath Elliot argues that Christianity is and always has been antithetical to women's freedom and equality. He further notes that Christianity is male dominated, set up by men to protect and perpetuate their power

(<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentsfree/2008/ang/19/gender.religion>). In the same

source, Susan Anthony pointed out that the worst enemy women have is the pulpit. Helen Gardener (1885) hinted that every injustice that has ever been fastened upon women in a Christian country has been authorised by the Bible and revered and perpetuated by the pulpit

(<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentsfree/2008/ang/19/gender.religionavers>).

The research findings regarding women's position in the church and the views of the theologians cited above suggest that Christianity and feminism are not compatible. This observation is however contrary to what Sweetman (2007) observed in the Christian base communities of Latin America. Sweetman (2007) found out that women were represented in big numbers in the structure and organisation of the church. Women were allowed to read and reflect on the Bible from their own perspective. This variation may be due to the fact that feminist movements started in the Western countries like America that the ideology is entrenched in society to the extent of being embraced in churches while the ideology is still in the infancy in developing countries like Zimbabwe. Sweetman (2007) advises that contemporary churches should move beyond the conventional masculine image of God, and depict God in alternative and female forms.

It also came to the researchers' attention that there were differences in attitudes towards embracing feminist ideology in the church between the adults and the youths. The youths expressed favourable attitudes towards equality between men and women in the church. Documentary analysis of programmes for youths in the sampled churches indicated that activities were shared between boys and girls equally. In interrogating the youths on why their programmes were pro-gender equality, they indicated that feminist ideology is practical catchword in modern society.

Educational institutions were cited as major sources of feminist ideas that they as youths were implementing in the church. The youths' favourable attitudes towards gender equity in the church tally with Schussler (2000)'s argument that readers of the Bible must abandon the long-held convictions such as the view that God has written it. She advocated for biblical interpretation that empowers women and men in their struggle for survival and transformation (<http://www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Daphine-Hompson>). In an endeavour to support gender equality in the church, one female youth member says: Men should not view themselves as perfect saints. The biblical David, a man, went out of his way to get Uriah's wife, to the extent of masterminding Uriah's death (2 Samuel 11 verses 2 -17). God respects agenda, not gender.

On the other hand, adults revered the church doctrine more than the youths. When the researchers interrogated adults on their attitudes towards gender equality in the church, the adults made reference to the scriptures which support subordination of women by men. Their views are in agreement with Hompson who argued that women are forbidden from positions of authority in the church. She further advanced that it is part of God's order that women are submissive to their husbands and that God expects women to submit to their husbands freely. However, this position is attacked by post-biblical feminists like Mary Daly who reject the authority of the Bible and regard it as a male project and toxic (<http://www.theologynetwork.org/theology-of-everything/on-overview-of-feminist-theology.htm>.)

7. Conclusion

The following conclusions were drawn from the research findings:

- The participants embraced feminist ideology in other spheres of life but were indifferent to the ideology in the church. The church doctrine is upheld which denies women participation in church activities.
- The organisation and structure of the sampled churches is patriarchal thereby militating against feminist ideology in the church.
- The youths were more receptive to feminist ideology than adults who adhered to the church doctrine which supports patriarchy.
- Feminism and Christianity are not compatible since the participants supported feminism outside the church but were indifferent to it in the church. This conclusion tallies with Melanie Springer's view that Christianity and feminism are incompatible ideologies.
- Educational institutions are powerful agencies of feminist ideology since the youths' favourable attitudes towards gender equality in the church has been linked to exposure of the youths to feminist ideas in educational institutions.

8.Recommendation

The following recommendations were drawn from the research findings:

- Churches should embrace feminist ideology in the same way the doctrine is received in secular institutions.
- Gender advocacy groups should also target churches.
- The organisation and structure of churches should be gender-balanced.
- The Bible should be interpreted in a way which does not subjugate, impoverish and deny women autonomy.

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