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Gender Roles in Religion
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Women's Inclusion in Jesus and Christian Movements

In the book *In Memory of Her*, Elisabeth Schusler Fiorenza illustrates many points about woman's role in the early Jesus and Christian movements. Fiorenza's desire in this book and what she emphasizes most is that women were included and very important in the early Jesus and Christian movements, and it is because of andocentric texts that women's roles and inclusiveness are not highlighted and celebrated in the ancient and Biblical texts. Fiorenza has a very good knowledge of this subject after studying in the University system and doing much research in collaboration with various groups concerned with women in church and theology, research assistants, lectures and seminars at various institutions including Chicago and Duke Divinity Schools, and in connection with prominent lecturers. In my paper, I am going to outline Fiorenza's thesis explaining that the "vision of Jesus" included all people, that Galatians 3:28 illustrates that the Christian community viewed all people as equal, that women were paradigms of "true discipleship," and that women had a large role in spreading Christianity.

"The Basiela Vision of Jesus as the Praxis of Inclusive Wholeness" illustrates the inclusiveness that the Jesus movement is supposed to reflect. In this section, Fiorenza highlights that Jesus' teachings were to restore humanity, place people at the locus of his power, and show that the Banquet Table, which was the central image of his early movement, included all people and was not reflective of ritual purity practices of the Jewish community (119-120). Fiorenza then followed these points with the statements:

Wholeness spells holiness and holiness manifests itself precisely in human wholeness . . . Everydayness, therefore, can become revelatory, and the presence and power of God's sacred wholeness can be experienced in *every* human being. (120)

. . . the salvation of God's basileia is present and experientially available whenever Jesus casts our demons (Luke 11:20), heals the sick and the ritually unclean, tells stories about the lost who are found of the uninvited who are invited, or of the last whole will be first. (121)

However, this future is mediated and promised to all members of Israel. No one is exempted. Everyone is invited. Women as well as men, prostitute as well as Pharisees. The parable of the "Great Supper" jolts the hearer into recognizing that the basileia includes everyone. (121)

She then highlights how the idea of equality of all people in the Jesus movement created tension between the patriarchal societies of that time period (122). The author then argues through stories of Jesus and texts that Jesus claimed the basileia for three distinct groups including the 1) destitute poor, 2) the sick and crippled, and the 3) group of tax collectors, sinners, and prostitutes (122-130). "The Basileia Vision of Jesus" and the passages above illustrates that the Jesus movement was not an exclusive movement carrying on the patriarchal structure, but was rather a movement that was inclusive of all people including women.

Fiorenza illustrates that all people are equal in the Jesus and Christian movement in the section "Analysis and Self-Understanding of Galatians 3:28." In this section, the author argues that "male" and "female" are no factor for Paul in Galatians 3:28, people are children and heirs of God after baptism, and people were set free through Christ (208-210). Fiorenza then expresses:

Equality among all those who call upon the Lord is based on the fact that they have all one and the same master who shares his wealth with all of them (Rom 3:22). (210)

She then explains:

Galatians 3:28 not only advocates the abolition of religious-cultural divisions and the domination and exploitation wrought by institutional slavery but also of domination based on sexual divisions. It repeats with different categories and words that within the Christian community no structures of dominance can be tolerated . . . It proclaims that in the Christian community all distinctions of religion, race, class, nationality, and gender are insignificant. All the baptized are equal, they are one in Christ. (213)

Following these passages, Fiorenza then highlights women's roles in various religious experiences showing that some oriental cults included women, only a few philosophical schools allowed equality of women, and women got to participate in ascetic communities as equals (213-215). The author then stresses how the radical inclusiveness of the Christian movement expressed in Galatians 3:28 created tension between the patriarchal society of this time period for it offered a "new religious vision to women and slaves" that rejected men's superiority and allowed them to study, worship, and participate in Christianity (216-218). Through the section "Analysis and Self-Understanding of Galatians 3:28" Fiorenza highlights how everyone in Christianity, regardless of race, color, and especially gender, are equal in the work of God.

In the section "The Gospel of Mark" in the chapter "Patriarchal Household of God and Ekklesia of Women," Fiorenza illustrates that women were "paradigms of true discipleship" in the time of Jesus. She explains that Mark saw messiahship as one suffering, a "true disciple of Jesus must expect suffering, hatred, and persecution," how the Markan Jesus exhorts people who accept and serve the lower status (317-318). The author then adds that leaders should serve their community, disciples should sacrifice their suffering for the Christian movement, and disciples of Jesus were not true disciples (318-319). Then Fiorenza follows with these statements:

But while the circle of the twelve male disciples does not follow Jesus on his way to the cross for fear of risking their lives, the circle of women disciples exemplifies true discipleship. (319)

The four women---Mary of Magdala, Mary, the daughter or wife of James the younger, the mother of Joseph, and Salome---are preeminent among the women disciples who have followed Jesus. . . Though the twelve have forsaken Jesus, betrayed, and denied him, the women disciples by contrast, are found under the cross, risking their own lives and safety. (320)

Thus at the end of Mark's Gospel the women disciples emerge as examples of suffering discipleship and true leadership. They are the apostolic eye-witness of Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection. (321)

Following these passages, Fiorenza refutes any claim that women were not true disciples in Mark's text displaying that the women fled from the burial site and did not alert the public due to them being commanded to only alert the "disciples and Peter" and finally she summarizes her argument that people of the lower class especially women were the "paradigms of true discipleship" (323). "The Gospel of Mark" section displays that women were very important to the spread of Jesus' movement by being true disciples who sacrificed the threat of suffering for Jesus' cause.

The section "Missionaries" in the chapter "The Early Christian Missionary Movement" further illustrates the importance of women in the early Christianity and its spread. Fiorenza in this section highlights how there were many oriental cults in this time period and that wandering preachers and teachers were very important to the spread of a movement's ideals (168-169). The author then stresses how missionary movements were also very important to the spread of Christianity and that women were very involved in the Christian movements explaining:

The practice of missionary partners in the Jesus movement seems to have been followed by the Christian missionary movement as well. This allowed for the equality of women and men in missionary work. (169)

Fiorenza then adds:

The Pauline letters mention women as Paul's coworkers, but these women were not the "helpers" of Paul or his assistants . . . The genuine Pauline letters apply missionary titles and such characterizations as co-worker (Prisca), brother/sister (Apphia), *diakonos* (Phoebe), and apostle (Junia) to women also. They usually equate co-workers and "those who toil." In 1 Corinthians 16:16ff Paul admonishes the Corinthians to be "subject to every co-worker and laborer" and to give recognition to such persons (169)

Fiorenza then illustrates that Euodia and Syntyche had an equal partnership in the missionary work and displayed Paul's concern in making sure that they shared the same commitment to the gospel (170). She also displays that Phoebe was very important in early Christianity with her being the minister or roughly translated as *diakonos* of the Church in Cenchreae, how Junia working with Andronicus were true apostles, and how Thechla, which worked closely with Paul, was a very powerful missionary, preacher, and baptizer in the Christian movement (172-175). The highlighted passages and the stories of the featured women in the missionary movement display the importance and role of women as equal and important leaders in the Christian missionary movement.

In the book *In Memory of Her*, Fiorenza illustrates that women, although not shown very well in andocentric texts, were equals and very important in the Jesus and Christian movements. Throughout history and even in today's society, women in Christianity do not share equality in the work and discipleship of Jesus because of the continuing history of patriarchal oppression displayed in the andocentric texts of the Bible. However, as Fiorenza shows us in this book, the vision of Jesus included all people into his work and discipleship. In the "Epilogue," Fiorenza states, "Only when the *ekklesia* of women is joined by all those in biblical religion who share the vision of the people of God as the discipleship of equals, only then is the gospel proclaimed in the

whole world” (351). Although there were a limited amount of texts to study to grasp the true role, importance, and equality in the Christian movement, Fiorenza gives a great illustration of the equality and importance women had in early Christianity and that the true vision of Jesus will not be achieved until women and all people are included and seen as equals in his work and discipleship.