

# PAUL'S CONSTRUCTION OF *IMAGO DEI* IN 1 CORINTHIANS 11:7-9 AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR GENDER POWER RELATIONS IN THE ANGLICAN CHURCH OF KENYA: A POSTCOLONIAL FEMINIST EXAMINATION

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## 1.0 Introduction and background to the study

This paper examines the implications of Paul's perception of *imago Dei* in 1 Cor 11:7-9 for gender power relations in the Anglican Church of Kenya (ACK). While the Genesis text (1:27) describes God as creating *ha-adam* in the 'image of God' "male and female he created them," Paul in 1 Cor 11:7 argues for man's exclusive God-likeness.<sup>1</sup>

Paul constructs his perception of *imago Dei* in male and female through unequal gender power relations in 1 Cor 11:1-16, which he justifies through the hierarchy of subordination (v.3) and the obligation of the veil for women (vs. 4-6). Through use of a postcolonial feminist framework, I have elsewhere identified that Paul's construction of gender power relations cannot be properly understood without taking into account the hierarchical gender relationships in the Roman family structure to which he is heavily indebted alongside Jewish and Greek family structures (Mwaniki 2009).

The construction of the male gender as the image or representation of the divine may however be traced beyond the Roman Empire to the construction of masculinity and femininity in the ancient Mediterranean world through Greek philosophical thoughts and scientific findings. Identifying male with reason and female with senses, Aristotle and Philo after him depicted a woman as inferior and an incomplete or deformed version of a male. For Aristotle, the male was more 'divine' and for Philo the *nous* (the rational part of the soul) was patterned after God (Wegner 1991:45, 51, Gonzalez 2007:21-25, Conway 2008:2). These Greek philosophical thoughts

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<sup>1</sup> Paul states: "A man...is the image and glory of God; but the woman is the glory of man" (1 Cor 11:7). (NIV). While the original Hebrew meaning of the term 'image of God' as it first occurs in Gen 1:26-27, 5:1-3, 9:1-7 has long been debated in the Christian theological tradition, this paper argues that both male and female equally share all it implies to be created "in the image of God," "male and female..." (Gen 1:27). This for me includes the ability of both male and female to image God in their moral, spiritual, and intellectual nature and the ability of both to equally actualize qualities that God has bestowed on them.

shaped gender relationships and male/female relationship to the divine in the Greek, Jewish and Roman world. Jewish Rabbinic exegesis of the creation accounts for instance “disallowed the divine image to Eve” (Johnson 2004:195).

Paul’s perception of *imago Dei* in 1 Cor 11:7-9 is therefore indebted to these Greek philosophical ideas which he uses to read the creation accounts in Gen 1-2 in a way that excludes a woman from God’s image. Thus, his perception is not a divinely designed condition of a woman in relation to man and to God but a *social construction*, which distorts the perception of *imago Dei* not only in a woman but also in a man and by extension, the perception of the image of God itself, which comprises both male and female.

Paul’s distorted socially constructed perception of *imago Dei* in male and female was canonized and as a sacred text continued to shape the theology of *imago Dei* in relation to gender in the future church. This theology has for instance influenced the exclusion of women from ordination to priesthood in the history of the Christian tradition.

This paper uses a postcolonial feminist lens through which to enter into a dialogue between the Church Missionary Society (CMS), ACK and the pre-colonial Kenyan perceptions of *imago Dei* in male and female, in relation to Paul. Postcolonial feminist hermeneutics seeks to explore and resist imperial and patriarchal structures of subordination in biblical texts as well as in imperial and colonial contexts and proposes new emancipatory procedures of mutual relationships among human beings.

I will first examine the construction of gender identity in the Kenyan (Kikuyu) pre-colonial context. Second, I will identify and address areas in which the CMS and ACK have either mimicked (imitated) or resisted the prevailing perceptions of *imago Dei* in the religious and cultural structures. The paper finally proposes a more egalitarian re-reading of the text and its appropriation in the contemporary church context.

## **2. The encounter between missionary Christianity, ACK and pre-colonial Kenyan perceptions of *imago Dei* in gender identity**

The perception of *imago Dei* in male and female in CMS and currently in ACK cannot be fully conceived without entering into dialogue with the pre-colonial Kenyan perceptions of *imago Dei*

in male and female, with which the gospel interacted and continues to interact. In the following section I will identify some of the ways in which the perception of *imago Dei* was constructed through gender, limiting myself to the Kikuyu Kenyan pre-colonial community.

### **2.1 Perceptions of *imago Dei* in male and female in pre-colonial Kikuyu community**

The perception of the image of God in male and female in pre-colonial Kikuyu Kenyan community may be best reflected in ways in which the Kikuyu ethnic group constructed gender power relations. A gender analysis (Mwaniki 2000:16-36 cf. Kenyatta 1938) has revealed that Kikuyu women were empowered in some pre-colonial institutions.<sup>2</sup>

However, a Kikuyu woman held an inferior status to a man in all Kikuyu traditional institutions. Women for instance had no legal rights to rule, neither were their views sought in all decision-making councils in the socio-political organization starting with the family, clan, village and district councils. Women's agricultural autonomy was also less significant because they neither had rights to own land nor had they any say in its disposal (Kenyatta 1938:31). *Sexual status counted more than age status* in matters of land and property inheritance where a male child was more privileged than his mother. Besides, a wife was subjected to her husband as her head through payment of bride price.

### **2.2 Dialogue between the pre-colonial, CMS and ACK perceptions of *imago Dei***

The history of the CMS in Kenya goes back to 1844 when it started its mission work at the coast. What is *common* between the church in Corinth, the church in England (from where the CMS missionaries came), and the missionary church in Kenya is that the church is operating within political imperial/colonial structures and also within existing cultures. It will be interesting to find out whether Paul's struggle to position a woman within the structures of his day is also the struggle of the Church of England, CMS and the ACK.

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<sup>2</sup> Kikuyu women for instance participated in important rites and ceremonies as leaders of women's institutions. The division of gender roles gave them some economic autonomy especially in agriculture and some elderly women who had supernatural religious powers participated in religious ceremonies which accorded them prestige.

As indicated in the introduction, Paul's socially constructed view of exclusive male God-likeness continued to distort the theology of *imago Dei* in relation to gender in the Christian tradition. In the Church of England for instance, this gender-biased theology reinforced the imperial Victorian 'values' of womanhood where Victorian exhortations from the pulpit urged women to find fulfillment in their duties as wives and mothers at home (Gill 1994:4).<sup>3</sup>

The CMS missionaries made every effort to liberate Kenyan women from cultural practices which were oppressive to them such as bride price, female circumcision, polygamy, levirate marriages etc. They also empowered women through education despite its gender-biased curriculum.<sup>4</sup> It is however notable that as colonial agents of civilization, the missionaries aimed at 'civilizing' African culture more than they aimed at liberating women from patriarchy. The missionaries for instance kept women from ordination and only introduced them to supportive roles in the church. In so doing, they mimicked the existing pre-colonial and colonial religious and political structures, and also Paul's notion of male headship.

The ACK, improving on what the missionaries did to emancipate women, has shown aspects of *resistance* to the colonial and patriarchal perceptions of a woman by empowering her especially through education and ordination to priesthood, and through encouraging women to participate in diverse ways in the church as lay people. This includes allowing women to sit in forums of decision-making with men, an aspect that is contrary to African culture. On the other hand however, ACK has also shown aspects of *mimicry* by way of imitating Paul, the history of the Christian tradition as well as the pre-colonial Kenyan communities to the detriment of a woman in the following ways:

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<sup>3</sup> The breach between King Henry VIII and the pope in the sixteenth century led to the creation of the Church of England as a nationalized church. Important for us here is that gender construction or the perception of *imago Dei* in a woman in the Church of England was not only a biblical and patriarchal issue but also an imperial one. The interplay between patriarchy and British imperialism, which could not be divorced in the state church was reinforced and also reinforced the already patriarchally and imperially coded Pauline theology of gender, to the detriment of a woman.

<sup>4</sup> For more information about the CMS missionaries in Kenya and women's education, see among others Presley 1992, Kanogo 1993, KNA Mss/61/341 'CMS' 1939-1940, KNA Mss/61/348 'Kabete Girls' School 1941-1943.

**The hierarchical structure-** Women are highly under-represented in the structural organization of ACK which has a gendered hierarchy both in the diocesan and provincial (national) levels (Mwaniki 2010:239-336).

**Imaging God as male-**This is clear from the androcentric use of the language and symbolisms. While it is clear that the language that human beings use for God is only metaphorical, the church has not been keen to show a clear dichotomy between the metaphorical and the literal use of metaphors for God.<sup>5</sup>

**Education-**Both the ACK and the Kenyan government have not been able to eradicate gender disparities in education.<sup>6</sup>

**Land and property ownership-**Both the church and the Kenyan government have not liberated women from the cultural domination of male ownership of land and family property.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, the church has not put policies in place to address some of the oppressive cultural practices like female genital mutilation (FGM), bride price, and multiple sexual relationships among men which threatens the position of the legal wife in the context of HIV/AIDS epidemic.<sup>8</sup>

### **3. Proposals for re-imaging the distorted perception of *imago Dei* in male and female in the text and in the contemporary church**

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<sup>5</sup> The metaphor for God as 'Father' has for instance been literalized whereby God has been imaged as male. This literalization has constructed gender in a way that only male can image the 'male' God and consequently represent God in 'his' service. Women have therefore been excluded from the image of the divine as well as full service to 'him.'

<sup>6</sup> A less percentage of women continues to enroll in higher institutions of learning as compared to that of men with fewer women than men in the fields of Science and Mathematics, and more in humanities (Eshiwani 1983:1, Karanja 2003:1-4). This is due to cultural attitudes and traditional practices.

<sup>7</sup> According to Kameri Mbote (2006:2), "Women's ownership of property is governed by statutory law, customary laws and religious laws... Most women have access/possession of land but do not legally own it." The national law therefore reinforces traditional laws to the detriment of women.

<sup>8</sup> While a CMS 'Circular on Marriage' in 1943 was protective of women whose husbands decided to live a polygamous marriage after the first marriage by proposing that such a woman could seek separation with maintenance (KNA Mss/61/55 Marriage Ordinance 1939-1945), the current ACK *Constitution* is silent about any provision for a woman who is married to a man monogamously and later the husband becomes a polygamist or engages in sexual relationship with other women.

The church needs to admit that Paul's perception of *imago Dei* is a social/imperial construction and not a divine condition of gender identity, hence this text has been given more power than it deserves by canonizing it as a sacred text. The church in Kenya today is better placed and more privileged than Paul to bring about gender reconstruction both in the church and in the society.

The church needs to ensure egalitarian church structures based on its own *Church Constitution* which "...proclaims that all human beings are made in the image of God...and...allows no discrimination in the membership and government of the Church based on grounds of...gender difference" (*The Anglican Church of Kenya Constitution 2002:6, Article IV*).

The church needs to affirm egalitarian as opposed to hierarchical relationships between gender. Studies have shown that gender disparity exposes an extremely high percentage of women to the risk of HIV and AIDS epidemic, especially within marriage (Phiri 2003:8-9, Dube 2004:9,<sup>9</sup> Mwaura 2008:127-128, Nadar 2009:3). They also open the way to violence and abuse of women.

There is need for the church to use egalitarian biblical hermeneutical models to deconstruct the relationships of domination and subordination and reconstruct equal gender relationships. These include the Trinitarian model<sup>10</sup> and Jesus' treatment of women model among others, and Contextual Bible Study (CBS) interactive interpretive model.<sup>11</sup>

#### 4. Conclusion

In conclusion, although the ACK has made a commendable effort to re-image the distorted perception of *imago Dei* in a woman especially through ordination of women to priesthood, Paul's construction of *imago Dei* in 1 Cor 11:7-9 as exclusively male continues to reinforce

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<sup>9</sup> Records from UNDP&UNAIDS 2001:1 indicate that 80% of women in stable marital relationships were infected by their partners as a result of unequal gender relationships (cited in Dube 2004:9). Patriarchal structures silence women and render them passive sexually so that they are unable to protect themselves from infection.

<sup>10</sup> The Trinitarian model allows for equal participation of the members based on their diverse gifts.

<sup>11</sup> This is a community reading practice that supports the reconstruction or transformation of social relation. Its uniqueness lies in its recognition of the untrained or 'ordinary' African reader as a partner in academic Bible reading. It therefore gives the trained reader a safe space to collaborate with the ordinary readers and enables them to use their interpretive resources for their own liberation.

unequal gender power relations in the church in many ways. The patriarchal structures of government in the traditional society, colonialism, national laws and religion have collaborated to maintain the subordinate status of a woman. This affirms the view of the Two-Thirds World postcolonial feminist theologians that imperialism/colonialism, gender and religion have collaborated to the detriment of women in the colonial process. A postcolonial optic calls for disruption of such binary opposition (Dube 2000, Kwok, 2002, 2005).

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