

## The Women and Religion Resolution The First Decade

by Lucile S. Longview

*Lucile S. Longview is a Unitarian Universalist lay woman who, as a budding feminist in her 60s, became aware of her life-long submersion in patriarchal consciousness. At the same time she also began to note the extent to which biblical teachings sanctify women's inferiority to men. Challenged to improve the image of women she initiated a business resolution titled Women and Religion. Others from First Parish UU Church in Lexington, Massachusetts, joined enthusiastically in placing the resolution on the agenda for the 1977 General Assembly where an amended version was unanimously adopted. The administration and staff responded by implementing significant parts of the resolution and groups of women in many districts throughout the continent continue to explore and celebrate it. Lucile, however, insists that much still needs to be done to disclose the religious roots of bias against women and in re-imagining a more egalitarian world view. The paper which follows was given at the 10th anniversary celebration of the adoption of the resolution.*

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During the past year I have been reviewing with growing interest and enthusiasm a decade of denominational involvement with the Women and Religion Resolution. That resolution initiated a search within the Unitarian Universalist Association for the religious roots of sexism. The search for male bias was directed to the scriptures of the world religions and to statements of the prophets, particularly those within the Judeo-Christian tradition. We seek the roots of, the

underlying cause for, male domination played out in all institutions, religious and secular. Special emphasis was placed on the need to examine the relationship between religious doctrine and sexism as practiced between husband and wife in the home.

How far have we come? "Not far," I thought. What have we learned? "That tremendous forces both within individuals and within institutions work in resistance to change." Nevertheless a quiet, intangible and non quantifiable transformation is taking place. Women's spirituality is being released from the fetters of patriarchal consciousness. It is a slow but definite "Coming to Awareness" that is taking place among us. One by one and then many are beginning to perceive ourselves as individual persons in our own right in contrast to the culture-defined women we had earlier attempted to mold for acceptability. "The becoming of personhood is sacred!"

Innumerable activities during the decade have contributed to this change of consciousness that is breathing in our denomination. I am amazed at the variety and scope of our involvement:

Women and Religion Conferences--Continental, District and local

Publications giving a voice to the laity within districts and individual church communities

Workshops, panels, discussion groups at General Assembly, District meetings and in some churches. The seminar series titled "Cakes for the Queen of Heaven," by Shirley Ranck, should increase these significantly.

A rich selection of Feminist Theology books published by Beacon Press

Creative rituals and symbols such as the Water Ceremony that speak to women's sense of connectedness with the totality of life

A few Worship Services critiquing patriarchal religion from a feminist perspective

Denominationally and church sponsored changes in gender exclusive language in hymnals and worship materials.

All of those activities and more contribute to the new awareness, the new consciousness within the UUA. That is the way a new day comes. Bit by bit and everywhere there is a conspiracy for change.

Moreover, our efforts to liberate women's spirituality comprise a small but important segment of the phenomenal movement sweeping through all denominations.

Analyzed from the distance of 10 years it is possible to see more clearly the audacity of feminists--lay feminists both male and female--opening to the denomination as a whole, the exploration of sex bias in religious literature and doing that by resolution--for heaven's sake!

In retrospect the feat appears more probable for in 1977 women were not yet fully on the map of male consciousness. Few, is any of those in charge, questioned that an innocent sounding resolution titled Women and Religion could, like the Trojan Horse, have anything of consequence inside.

Once we began examining from a feminist perspective the male bias so prevalent in the scriptures in the Judeo-Christian tradition another more immediate question arose, "Are the basic values in the religious tenets of the UUA similarly biased?"

Those tenets of belief, then called "purposes and objectives" and now referred to as "Principles" had been debated, struggled over and contested for 65 hours by those men, primarily ministers, who had gathered in Syracuse in 1959 for final merger negotiations between the Unitarians and the Universalists.

A workshop at the Women and Religion Conference in Grailville, Ohio, in 1979 set out to explore whether the UUA Principles established 20 years earlier by men affirmed women as they affirmed men. The participants came through with a resounding, "NO!" "Nor," said those present, "do they indicate a respect for the totality of life and for the earth, which we deem important."

Opening the UUA Principles for review and revision began that night! It was the Women and Religion Resolution and its implementation that provided the original impetus for opening the Principles for analysis and revision.

It was lay women who continued the dialogue and who presented a draft form of revised Principles to their districts. In 1981, two separate drafts of the principles were submitted by districts and appeared on the General Assembly Agenda. High Drama ensued. That is a long story in itself. By 1985 a new statement of Principles had been approved two years in a row by General Assemblies as required in the bylaws. There was mild celebration, apparently more because the task was completed than

because of the content--the basic values--the denomination had endorsed.

As we summarize action taken by the UUA to implement the Women and Religion Resolution we must carefully examine the New Principles from a feminist perspective. Because of the New Principles

We are at a NEW BEGINNING

We labor in new fields--in a new paradigm--a NEW REALITY CONSTRUCT

We must lift up and celebrate the fact that a phenomenal change in practice and in ideology has been embraced by the Unitarian Universalist Association

In practice: Women, half of humanity, have historically been excluded from shaping religious traditions. The UUA Bylaws Revision Committee that recommended the major portion of the final version of the current Principles was composed of four women and three men with one of the men chairing the committee. This in contrast to the all male membership of the committee at merger.

In ideology it is particularly significant that our new Principles no longer endorse only a world view based on hierarchical relationships with the male dominion over all. No longer do we as women compromise ourselves--participate in our own diminishment --when we say we are UUA members. Gone is the statement that we "cherish and spread the universal truths taught by the great prophets and teachers in every age and tradition....." It was many of those very prophets and teachers who

mouthed those atrocious statements about our nature and our destiny that women have been attempting to exorcise for years--such as:

Tertullian (A.D. 220) "Woman is a temple built over a sewer, the gateway to the devil. Woman, you are the devil's doorway. You should always go in mourning and in rags."

Luther (1483-1546) "If a woman grows weary and, at last, dies of childbearing, it matters not. Let her die from bearing; she is there to do it."

Instead of hierarchy being the underlying assumption of our world view and male dominance assumed, the current principles embrace a sense of connectedness and respect for the totality of life that women named at that first discussion in Grailville. The final Principle reads: We covenant to affirm and promote "respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part."

That statement, "RESPECT FOR THE INTERDEPENDENT WEB OF ALL EXISTENCE OF WHICH WE ARE A PART" represents a shift in perspective of global proportions. A world view based on respect for all of existence is life-giving. A world view based on dominion over all has led us into exploitation of the earth and its resources for the benefit, supposedly, of man--a view that has us on the brink of a man-made Armageddon.

We celebrate the turn to a new consciousness. The first seeds of a reality based on nurturance and caring have been planted. We must not let them go unattended.

As we celebrate the Unitarian Universalist Decade with the Women and Religion Resolution we must not relax as though our tasks were completed. We have barely begun. We must continually be aware of the sexism in the epoch that is dying and also contribute every ounce of energy available and every insight from our feminist consciousness to the new day that is being born.