

**National Interfaith Forum  
27 February 2011**

## **The Role of Women in Society from a Christian Perspective**

**Mary Eastham**

The role of women in society from a Christian perspective must be developed against the backdrop of interfaith dialogue, the Christian imperative for the 21st century. Interreligious dialogue is about *understanding* in order to bring about justice and peace between peoples, cultures, nations, women and men, children and adults... in short, all those dimensions of society in which conflict exists because of misunderstanding. Conflict is transformed into justice and peace only by the kind of understanding which broadens the horizons of intelligibility.

In July 2000, Raimon Panikkar, the great pioneer of interreligious dialogue, published the seminal article, "The Encounter of Religions: the Unavoidable Dialogue". For Panikkar, dialogue between religions and cultures is unavoidable at this time in history because people from different religions and cultures encounter one another on the streets of even the most provincial towns in New Zealand, not just in major metropolitan areas. People talk to one another and about one another. In some instances, fear and prejudice prevent conversation from occurring at all and people remain locked up in boxes. If dialogue is unavoidable, women can make a major contribution in society by facilitating a healthy conversation in three key publics of social influence: the public of the Church, the public of middle class society, and the public of the broader community.

Two statements from "The Unavoidable Dialogue" might open up discussion on the role of women in society from a Christian perspective. Though Panikkar would never claim to represent the Christian perspective, or speak from a feminist perspective, his life's work embodied a genuine effort to understand the "other" as she or he would like to be understood. Let's look at the first statement:

Dialogue is an activity of the human *logos*. It has to do with ideas, thoughts, interpretations, doctrines, views and insights. Each of us is, consciously or unconsciously, the carrier of a whole tradition, conveying an entire world. Dialogue makes this explicit. We do not say only what we guess or what occurs to us. Genuine dialogue is freighted with the burden and the dignity of the speaker's tradition. In dialogue I express my thoughts; but these thoughts, though thought by me, reveal a past and an environment of which I am scarcely aware. The partner discovers that I live and speak with tacit presuppositions. And our speech also reveals the unspoken. When the

village elder closes his address in the palaver of an African village, the headman says: "We understand both what you have said and what you have not said." (p. 158)

To the public of the Church: As women standing within a tradition with many theological branches: scriptural, doctrinal, mystical, sacramental, social and political, how do we confront the tension between the more life- giving branches within the Christian tradition and the patriarchal structures of the Church which close off dialogue?

To the public of middle class society: As women living a middle class lifestyle with its comforts and contradictions, how can we bear witness to the preferential option for the poor and a spirituality of the Earth?

These questions can be uncomfortable for women inspired by a vision of justice, solidarity and peace. These words can mean very different things depending on one's position in society and one's social and political influence within the Church or the broader society. These social facts make the dialogue tense and difficult.

Which prompts the next statement:

Genuine and deep dialogue with one another is not always possible. The partners have to share the same myth, standing at least partially under the same horizon of intelligibility. Certainly, this common myth must emerge slowly in the encounter itself, but as long as it is not shared religious communication will not be possible. A tree is always a tree so long as people

find it in the field of their sensory perception; but no deep understanding will come about if for one person the tree is just a vegetable computer and for the

other it is a body inhabited by a spirit. If they were to say they do not understand one another, they would come far closer to communicating than when one stigmatizes the other for 'talking nonsense' or when one reduces the other to one's own categories. When they are aware that they do not understand one another, and then try again to find a new basis for possible understanding, this is a dialogical lesson. Success is never guaranteed, but

the

*attempt* itself is dialogue. (p. 166)

To the public of the broader community: For women living within a European cultural horizon, how can we cross over into the world of people we have colonized? Do we let them be who they are without trying to persuade them that our way of life is necessarily better? I have just read Celia Lashley's book *The Power of Mothers* and been deeply touched by her stories about the lives of women in prisons who

have moved heaven and earth to be reunited with their children, only to be told by government agencies that they will never measure up to middle class standards of respectability.

Can women working closely with the poor and marginalised really hear their stories of struggle, suspend judgment and walk alongside them as sisters? These questions challenge me on a daily basis in my work with marginalised women with the experience of mental and emotional distress. I hope they provide a springboard for fruitful dialogue between women and all sectors of society working for justice and peace.

###

## **References**

Raimon Panikkar, "The Encounter of Religions: The Unavoidable Dialogue".  
*jnanadeepa: Pune Journal of Religious Studies, Formation of Religious Leaders*,  
Vol. 3 No.2  
July 2000.

Celia Lashlie, *The Power of Mothers: Releasing our Children*, Auckland: Harper Collins Publishers, 2010.