



Women in the Reformation

Women in Christian History

MRCC Fall '21

1

Vita Apostolica

Three basic principles:

- **Primitivism** – restoration of the early church described in Acts
- **Evangelicalism** – a passionate love for souls at home and abroad
- **Voluntary Poverty** – simple living, sharing of necessary property, and service to the poor



2

Beguines

- Religious order active in northern Europe in the 13th-16th centuries
- No formal vows, but committed to celibacy, voluntary poverty, care of poor and sick, and devotional practices



3

Lollard Movement

- Proto-Protestant movement led by John Wycliffe in 14th century
 - Oxford theologian who translated Bible in English
 - Believed that Christ left apostolic power to "every good true Christian man and woman living virtuously"
- Women's Participation
 - Though a minority, women took a leading role
 - Memorized scripture, taught it, and debated priests
 - Many women were martyred: Margery Baxter (Norfolk, 1428), Agnes Grebhill (Kent, 1511), Joan Ward (1512)



4

Christine de Pizan (1364–1430)



Illustration from *Book of the City of Ladies*

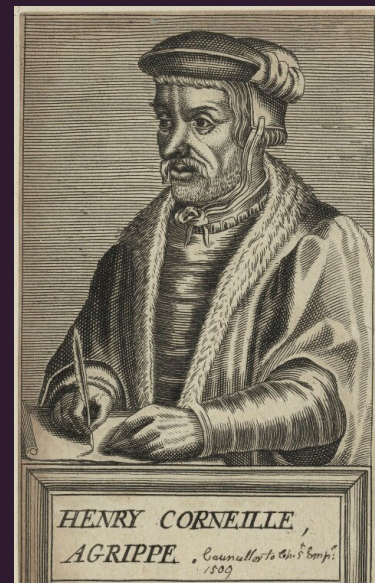


Christine de Pizan giving a lecture

- Well-educated as a child
- Poet and author at the court of King Charles VI
- Wrote *The Book of the City of Ladies*
 - Symbolic city in which women are appreciated and defended
 - Shows the importance of women's contributions to society
 - Only female voices, examples, and opinions are used in the text
- Using theological arguments from Gen 1:26, she argued against Aristotelian view that men and women are equally capable of virtue
- Promoted women's education and literacy

5

Cornelius Agrippa *"Nobility and Superiority of the Female Sex"* (1509)



6

Cornelius Agrippa
"Nobility and Superiority of the Female Sex" (1509)

→ Superiority of Eve

- Name means "life", Adam means "dirt" – she is closer to spirit, he closer to inert matter
- She was created in Paradise, while Adam was created outside it
- She was made from better material – flesh rather than clay
- Adam received command against eating, not Eve; thus, he is guilty
- Satan approached Eve first not because of her credulity, but because he was envious of her beauty

→ Christ came as a male because men are more guilty and more in need of redemption

- Christ's perfection comes from being born of a virgin woman without need of man
- It is women who were most faithful as disciples
- Women were given right to preach at Pentecost; Anna, Priscilla, and daughters of Philip taught in public



7

Renaissance Trends

Legal Changes

- Increasing subjugation of women to male guardians
- Women incapable of legal responsibility due to "imbecility" (revival of Aristotle)

Political Changes

- Women paid taxes and owned property, yet excluded from citizenship in new city-states and kingdoms
- Despite powerful women rulers (Mary and Elizabeth Tudor, Catherine de Medici), Protestants believed women's rule was unnatural and contrary to scripture

Economic Changes

- Paid work was separated from domestic work
- Formerly female professions (brewing, baking, pharmacy, printing) became male-only
- Fewer opportunities for financial independence

8



9

Benefits to Women

- Men and women both created in image of God – women no longer viewed as “impure”
- Medieval women had to transcend their sex to gain authority; for Protestants, female body was not a problem
- Sanctified daily labors of women
- Men were to respect and learn from their wives
- Emphasis on Bible led to higher literacy rates, more educational opportunities (though women’s options did not extend past youth)



10

Martin Luther: Marriage and Sexuality



- Marriage is “the first order of God”; all women should be married
- “The married state is not only equal to all other states but pre-eminent over them all, by they Kaiser, princes, bishops...for it is the commonest, noblest state.” (Luther)

11

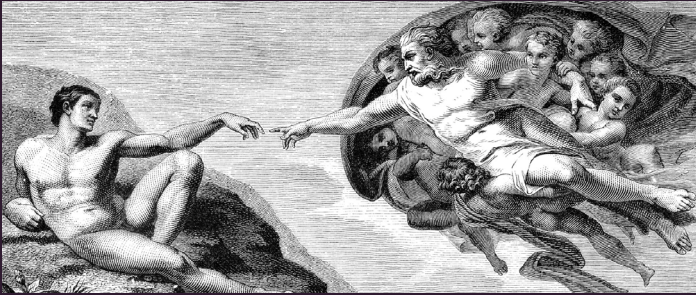
Martin Luther: Marriage and Sexuality



- Marriage is “the first order of God”; all women should be married
- Sexuality outside marriage is criticized and criminalized
- End of clerical celibacy; no more “clerical whores” or “clerical bastards”
- Marital Duties:
 - Both partners should be sexually available to each other
 - Adultery is punishable in men and women equally
 - Women are subordinate to husbands
- Motherhood is a woman’s primary vocation; closer women identified as wife and mother, godlier they became

12

Image of God?



“...for the woman appears to be somewhat different from the man, having different members and a much weaker nature.... For as the sun is more excellent than the moon (although the moon, too, is a very excellent body), so the woman, although she was a most beautiful work of God, nevertheless was not the equal of the male in glory and prestige.”

13

Curse



“This punishment [of servitude] too springs from original sin, and the woman bears it just as unwillingly as she bears those pains and inconveniences that have been placed on the flesh. The rule remains with the husband, and the wife is compelled to obey him by God’s command. He rules the home, and the state, wages war, defends his possessions, tills the soil, plants, etc. **The wife, on the other hand, is like a nail driven into the wall. She sits at home...** If Eve had persisted in the truth, she would not have been subjected to the rule of her husband, but she herself would have been a partner in the rule which is now entirely the concern of men....In this way Eve is punished.”

14

In the Home

“For just as the snail carries its house with it, so the wife should stay at home and look after the affairs of the household, as one who has been deprived of the ability of administering those affairs that are outside and that concern the state.”

(Luther, *Lectures on Genesis*)



15

Martin Luther: Marriage and Sexuality

“Unlike Catholicism, Luther did not promote female models of spiritual power. Luther’s God was not influenced by the Virgin Mary or supported by the work of female saints. Instead of the Virgin Mary, Luther extolled the virtues of Martha, the sister of Lazarus, who stayed in the kitchen, prepared the food, and oversaw the household.”

(Katherine French and Allyson Poska, *Women and Gender in the Western Past*)



16

Dissolution of Monasteries

“How should it come to any good when women join themselves in a separate life, contrary to the ordinance of God, yes, against nature, they give themselves to obedience to a woman, who has neither reason nor the understanding to govern whether in spiritual or in temporal matters, who ought not to govern but to be governed.”

- Augsburg town council, 1534



17

Closing of the Convents

- Biblical ideal was seen as wife and mother; no place for celibates
- Many women lost the opportunity for higher education
- Women lost opportunities for independent ministry
- Women were cut out of economic opportunities as social structures shifted to patriarchal family units



18

Outspoken Women



- **Katherine Zell** wanted to be judged “not according to the standards of a woman, but according to the standards of one whom God has filled with the Holy Spirit”
- **Argula von Grumbach** wrote: “What I have written to you is no woman’s chit-chat, but the word of God; and [I write] as a member of the Christian Church against which the gates of Hell cannot prevail...I am not unfamiliar with Paul’s words that women should be silent in church, but when I see that no man will or can speak, I am driven by the word of God when he said, ‘He who confesses me on earth, him will I confess’”
- **Anne Askew** argued that Paul’s injunction did not apply to her since she wasn’t preaching from a pulpit on Sundays; she was burned at the stake for heresy.

19

Radical Reformers (Anabaptists)



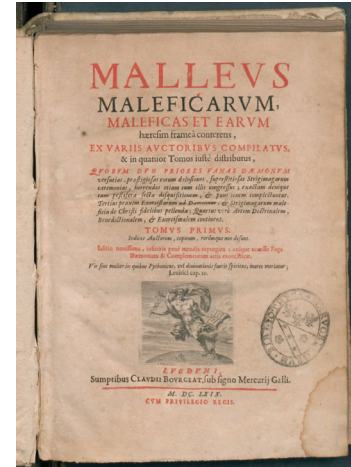
- Followers of Menno Simmons (Mennonites), Michael Sattler, Jan Hutter (Hutterites), and others; believed in adult believer’s baptism and tried to live out Acts 2 model; radical ideas like apocalypticism, prophecy, and communism
- Official teaching on women was identical to Magisterial Reform
- Yet women were active in informal leadership – evangelizing, teaching, studying scripture, and writing hymns
 - Some were mystics, like apocalyptic prophet Ursula Jost from Strassborg, who left a 40-page book
 - Elizabeth Dirks of Leeuward became a minister and perhaps a deaconess
- Many women were arrested, imprisoned, and executed by fellow Christians

20

WITCHES

Malleus Maleficarum (1486)

- German handbook for exterminating witches
 - Before 1400, accusations of witchcraft were extremely rare
 - In 1480s, the priests Heinrich Krämer and Jakob Sprenger began exorcising demons
 - Condemned by the church, they self-published a handbook
- Characteristics of every witch:
 1. Renounced her Christian faith
 2. Sacrificed unbaptized infants to Satan
 3. Devoted her whole life to the devil
 4. Engaged in sexual relations with the devil and/or *incubi*



21

WITCHES

Malleus Maleficarum (1486)



“When a woman thinks alone, she thinks evil...They are feeblers both in mind and body. It is not surprising that they should come more under the spell of witchcraft.... And it should be noted that there was a defect in the formation of the first woman, since she was formed from the rib of the breast which is bent in the contrary direction to a man...And since through the first defect in their intelligence, they are always more prone to abjure the faith, so through their second defect of inordinate passions, they search for, brood over and inflict various vengeances, either by witchcraft or by other means. Wherefore it is no wonder that so great a number of witches exist in this sex.”

22

WITCHES

“In all ages it is found true by experience that the devil hath more easily and oftener prevailed with women than with men. Hence it was that the Hebrews of ancient times used it for a proverb: The more women, the more witches.”

(Williams Perkins, *Discourse of the Damned Art of Witchcraft*, 1596)



23

WITCHES

- **Clemency:** trafficking with the devil is a sign of mental instability – mercy should be exercised (Reginald Scot, *The Discoverie of Witchcraft*, 1584)
 - **Punishment:** “Though it be a woman and the weaker vessel, she shall not escape, she shall not be suffered to live, but must die the death.” (Williams Perkins, *Discourse of the Damned Art of Witchcraft*, 1596)
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24

FEMICIDE

- Witchhunts targeted women
 - 80% of all accused witches were female
 - Reasons: women are “wrathful,” “credulous,” and have “slippery tongues”; “sisters of Eve”
 - Intense campaign against witches between 1450 and 1650; over 1 million people executed
 - Some entire villages were massacred – in one town, 389 women were killed and only one escaped
 - 600 women burned by a single bishop in Bamberg, Germany; 900 killed in a year in Würzburg
 - Many opposed the witchhunts, but they abruptly ended around 1690; last known execution was in 1775 in Germany
 - Probably a result of social transitions and growing wealth inequalities, as well as women’s more public roles
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25

Good for Women?

“Some see it as elevating the status of most women in praise of marriage, other see it as limiting women by denying them the opportunity for education and independence in monasteries and stressing wifely obedience, and still others see it as having little impact, with its stress on marriage a response to economic and social changes that had already occurred, and not a cause of those changes.”

(Merry Wiesner-Hanks, *Gender in History: Global Perspectives*)

26