



Denouncing the Real Villains of Sex Work

Towards a Compassionate Theology for Sex Workers

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Resumen

Hay un malentendido y una ignorancia flagrante por parte de las comunidades de fe que muestran compasión hacia las mujeres que han sido denostadas por haber sido forzadas a realizar trabajo sexual para poder sobrevivir. Este artículo se centra en el papel que jugaron las prostitutas en la Biblia Hebrea y el Nuevo Testamento y cómo frases como «fornicar» han subyugado a las mujeres en un papel de sumisión y han abierto la puerta a situaciones de abuso para con ellas. A través de esta investigación, el objetivo es encontrar una teología compasiva hacia aquellas personas que se dedican al trabajo sexual.

Palabras claves: Trabajo sexual, prostitución, estudios bíblicos, teología compasiva.

Abstract

There is misunderstanding and blatant ignorance on the part of faith communities showing compassion to women who have been bashed for being forced into sex work in order to survive. This article focus on the role prostitutes played in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament and how phrases such as «playing the whore» have subjugated women into a submissive role and have open the door to abusive situations for them. Through this exploration, the goal is to find a compassionate theology for those who engage in sex work.

Keywords: Sex work, prostitution, Bible studies, compassionate theology.



Resumo

Há um mal-entendido e uma ignorância flagrante das comunidades de fé que mostram compaixão por mulheres que foram caluniadas por serem forçadas a prostituição para sobreviver. Este artigo foca no papel desempenhado pelas prostitutas na Bíblia hebraica e no Novo Testamento e como frases como «e te prostituíste» têm subjugado as mulheres em um papel submisso e abrem a porta para o abuso para com elas. Através desta pesquisa, o objetivo é encontrar uma teologia de compaixão para aquelas pessoas que se envolvem no trabalho sexual.

Palavras-chave: Trabalho sexual, prostituição, estudos bíblicos, teologia compassiva.

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Introduction

Recently I was having dinner with a dear friend in Washington DC while on business. She asked how my doctoral studies were going and I shared with her my idea for an article, which was to explore what a compassionate theology for those who engage in sex work would look like. In response, she told me that she had been a sex worker close to fifteen years when she lived in New York City. She expressed how important this article would be because she had not know of many Christian ministers or churches that had shown her compassion and the difference it would have made had she received kindness rather than condemnation. After our dinner, I did recall that she had been a sex worker, but over time I had forgotten. I believe I had intentionally put that information out of my mind not knowing what to think about a friend of mine had actually been a prostitute.

Prior to this research, I had many questions and doubts regarding the morality of sex work. Like so many Christians, I assumed that there was little difference between sex working and sex trafficking and both dealt with the exploitation of another person, particularly women. Then there was the opinion I had formed from my interpretation of the scriptures about prostitution, especially from 1 Corinthians 6.15-19 which seemingly emphasises the «unholiness» of prostitution:

Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Should I therefore take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never! Do you not know that whoever is united to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For it is said, "The two shall be one flesh." But anyone united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him. Shun fornication! Every sin that a person commits is outside the body; but the fornicator sins against the body itself. Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own?

It is the goal of many Christians to live a «spotless» life that pleases God and based upon this above passage, it seems they are given one way to do this. However, realizing that others have interpreted scriptures to condemn homosexuality, I have learned to



dig deeper when it comes to matters of marginalizing others based upon scriptures. Thus, this article is intended to do just that.

In order to develop a compassionate theology for sex workers, I begin by examining how «whores» are bashed and demeaned in scripture. I will focus on the role prostitutes played in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament and how phrases such as «playing the whore» have subjugated women into a submissive role and have opened the door to abusive situations for them. This degradation continues with the marriage metaphor used to describe the nation of Israel as an «unfaithful wife» to her «husband God». The «Whore of Babylon» is a character who is named as one of the ultimate symbols of evil revealed in the last days. Her punishment in the end of the story told in the book of Revelation often gets translated as actual violence to human beings. This tragedy is also explored in this article. These accounts lead us to identifying who are the real villains of sex work and who benefits from labeling women as «unfaithful» and «wanton.» Through this exploration, I conclude the article with a proposal for a compassionate theology for those who engage in sex work.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

While there are some Christians who would have turned up their noses to my friend — myself included once ago —, there are other faithful followers of God who would have loved and embraced her. Rather than looking down on her, they would even applaud her courage in finding the best way to survive or for transgressing sexual and cultural norms. To be in solidarity with those who are marginalized and speak against the social and economic structures that would define women as outcasts, is the essence of feminist liberation theology:

What has sexuality to do with Feminist Liberation Theology? The answer is simple: everything. For every theology is always a sexual theology and it is necessary to uncover not just the gender codes but the sexual (ideological) assumptions of Christian theology, ecclesiology and the methods of theological inquiry which have pervaded our understanding of Christianity. (Althaus-Reid, 2004: 4)



In order to develop a compassionate theology for sex workers, we must learn from those who have been in solidarity and have uplifted the stories of these women. Through the lens of a feminist liberation theology, we are able to view sex workers as human beings and not merely «objects for pleasure.» There are many scholars who could be referenced in this exploration of a compassionate theology for sex workers, yet feminist liberation theologians such as Marcella Althaus-Reid and Avaren Ipsen have been some of the most prolific writers on this subject. Therefore, it is on these two sources that I rely heavily for my analysis in this article. Althaus-Reid (2008) shares:

Liberation Theology has helped us to unmask political interests masquerading as 'God's will' in theology. This is called 'ideological suspicion' in theology. The use of these suspicions when we read the Bible or when we reflect on the way that theology tells women what is sin, for instance, and the consequences of that, is a subversive act that I call Indecency.

Concurrently, Ipsen (2006) wrote in her dissertation about the lives of sex workers:

Liberation readings of biblical prostitution are not always liberating to actual prostitutes due to conflicts within the discourse of Christianity. A result of such conflict is that feminist and liberation hermeneutics have not fully extended a preferential option to poor women, particularly with regard to issues of sexuality (2).

Both Althaus-Reid and Ipsen explore not only the oppressive nature and impact of religious oppression on the individual, but also on the society as a whole. The unequal relationships that are promoted in the Hebrew Bible among the nations is a post-colonial tactic to promote superiority. When God's chosen people were deemed faithful, they were referred to in a male persona (Neh 9.7-8). When Israel was called unfaithful and threaten with punishment and humiliation, they were often referred to as a female whore (Jer 3:1-3). Clearly this was done to shame the Israelite men into not acting like a common weak woman who has no heart or commitment for her God husband. It is passages such



as these that seem to give little or no hope for the «whores» of society. Yet a prophet and liberator named Jesus came along to show compassion and understanding for many who were exploited by the power of imperialism. Jesus made it a practice to uphold the dignity of the women he encounter and was willing to be corrected by the better example a poor woman (Mt 15.22–28).

Bible Bashing of Prostitutes

Many Sunday School attendees are familiar with the stories of the «good» prostitutes Rahab (Jos 2) and the unnamed woman who anoints Jesus feet with her hair with an expensive bottle of perfume (Lk 7.36–50). What makes these women «good» is — as it has been taught from tradition — that they each repented from their «sin» of being whores after being «saved» by the providence of God. In fact, it seems to be a reoccurring theme throughout the scriptures, both Hebrew and Christian, that all women need to be «redeemed» from their fallen state. Going back to the beginning of this line of reasoning, we find Eve, who was a scapegoat for allowing her husband to sin and causing humanity to fall out of favor with God. From that story onwards, women have been assigned a lesser role in their families and communities, simply for being female. Just as God has been considered the redeemer of the male, men have been taught to be the «redeemer» of women by giving to them their «seed of life» for procreation. Women have been taught for centuries how to become «good wives and mothers» as their primary goal in life. Sadly, to deviate from this goal has created serious problems for many.

In her article, «Indecent Theology Challenging the Liberation Theology of the Pueblo’: Poor Women Contesting Christ» (1999), Althaus-Reid made a very curious statement that prompted me to research this topic. She makes the claim that:



In relation to women, Christ never went further than a compassionate empathy. He never challenged the pollution laws of women's menstruation, for instance, or discussed the patriarchal institution of marriage. If that was beyond his historically limited consciousness, as I believe was the case, then we need a new understanding of Christ's messianic role for our times, from the dialogue with today's women (41).

I wondered why she would say this when we have many examples of Christ speaking the language of compassion. Therefore, this prompted me to do a search on what both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament had to say about prostitution. I feel that looking at these passages as a sex worker might be similar to the way that I as a gay man look at the passages seemingly speaking about homosexuality.

As aforementioned, women deviating from the goal of procreation and housework have disrupted the tidy hetero-patriarchal order. Alice Keefe (2001) points out, «Israelite women were defined largely by their role as child bearers and were valued above all else for their service in fertility to the genealogical imperatives of the patrilineal family» (162). For a man to have had multiple sexual partners prior to becoming a husband was to be expected and it was common place for him to engage in sexual relations with others who were not his spouse. Kings David and Solomon are the most noteworthy in this regard. Keefe (2001) also noted, «Those who [actually] committed adultery violated the sexual order of Israelite society were, by law, to be 'cut off' from among their people (Lev 18.29)» (166).

It is important to distinguish between those who are labeled «harlot» as a form of punishment — but who have not been sexually promiscuous — versus those who actually are — either by force or choice — engaged in sexual work. The words «whore,» «prostitute,» «harlot» each have varying weight in terms of their politeness and can alternate in definition between those who engage in sexual relations with more than one person for monetary compensation or for none at all. The modern day term of «hooker» generally indicate those who have sex for money or other compensation and the word «slut» generally refers to those who «give it away for free» — both terms primarily used by males as



descriptors. I want to bring all of these words and the people they represent into this conversation to hear their voices and celebrate their humanity.

It can be said there is much misunderstanding and blatant ignorance on the part of faith communities showing compassion to women who have either been bashed by others for simply «stepping out of line,» those who have been forced into sex work in order to survive, and those who choose this line of work as their profession. How can communities of faith extend a welcome to these women in ways that do not belittle them nor oppress them? This is a difficult task as most Christian teachings and doctrines promote punishment for those deemed to be a «whore.» As Althaus-Reid (1997) states: «Prostitution is already a hermeneutical although undisclosed category of interpretation. Basically any activity declared sexually illegal makes of a woman a prostitute» (46).

The phrase «playing the whore» is such a loaded statement as it can either reference an individual or an entire nation. It can be considered as a post-colonial method of submission and control of women or an «ungodly» people. The substrata of the texts imply political and ethnocentric world views that use sex workers as a tool to demonize the other in order to construct a (national) self that is «pure,» «decent,» «just,» and «good.» Scripture passages such as Genesis 34.25–31 that tells the story of the rape of Dinah; Genesis 38.23–25 which narrates the story of Tamar; passages from Jeremiah 1-3 in which Israel is seen as the whore to God; the entire book of Hosea or Revelation 17 that depicts Babylon as the «Great Whore,» are just some of the references that mention either an individual or a nation labeled as a whore and the consequences that followed. The majority of these references of «playing the whore,» is used metaphorically as an insult to indicate spiritual unfaithfulness to God. Agreeing with Keefe (2001), it is important to note that:



It is indeed striking that there is no biblical narrative which depicts an Israelite women willingly engaging in an act of adultery. Israelite women are generally depicted as the victims of men's sexual transgression, not as the seducers or the perpetrators (the exceptions being Tamar and Ruth who stretch the boundaries of permissible sexual behaviors in order to effect the socially approved end of restoring a patrilineal line) (167).

While the use of metaphors may seem harmless to many biblical readers, there are some who are not able to distinguish between what is symbolic and what is real. And this is the root of many problems within the Christian churches. As cautiously pointed out by Sharon Moughtin-Mumby (2008), the «Metaphor has the power over people's minds and hearts» (13).

The Metaphor of the Broken Marriage

Most often when the phrase «playing the whore» is used in the Hebrew Bible it symbolizes a marriage that has been broken due to infidelity — and it is interesting to note that it is always on the part of the wife who has abandoned her husband and family for another lover(s). Moughtin-Mumby (2008) affirms:

It has by now become commonplace to remark that in the broken relationship [metaphor] it is the wife who is always the guilty party. Some authors even go so far as to say that they metaphor serves to depict the female as sinful. It cannot be denied that it is always the wife who is in the wrong, but this is obviously inevitable in the case of a metaphor in which the relationship between God and man is pictured as marriage (2).

One of the first occurrences in the Hebrew Bible where the phrase «playing the whore» was used is in reference to the rumored actions of Judah's daughter-in-law Tamar who became pregnant while she was betrothed to his youngest son (Gen 38.6–19). The readers could understand Tamar's actions as righteous. However, being female in a male dominated culture did not guarantee that being labeled as a «whore» would not result in



her being put to death. The Hebrew Bible reproduces the rumors: «About three months later Judah was told, ‘Your daughter-in-law Tamar has played the whore; moreover she is pregnant as a result of whoredom.’ And Judah said, ‘Bring her out, and let her be burned’» (Gen 38.24). Yet, in Tamar’s case, her actions were determined to be justified as she took the bold measure to prove her righteousness. Randy Maddox (1987) categorizes Tamar as the rare woman who stood up for herself and lived to tell about it:

Tamar’s desperate act of protest against the oppressiveness of patriarchal Hebrew culture had brought Judah, who exemplified that culture, to a piercing—though no doubt temporary—awareness of the sinfulness of such a society, Judah speaks to us the Word of God when he recognizes the righteousness of God in Tamar’s “protofeminist” claim to worth and dignity. Moreover, God would later add a self-validation to Tamar’s act by weaving it into the tapestry of divine grace and human response which prepared the way for the Messiah, who was to come in order that all such sinful oppression might be overcome (17).

The story of Tamar and Judah’s interaction highlighted the dynamic that existed between Israelite men and women — that women were subjugated to men of their culture — their father, brother, husband primarily and all men of the community secondarily. This is why the men of Judah’s community felt obligated to inform him of Tamar’s «whoredom» and Judah’s right to enact the death penalty for her. Being labeled a whore was one of the worst stigmas that could have happened to an Israelite woman because it demonstrated to everyone she was not fulfilling her «God-given» role of being submissive to male leadership. Renita Weems (1989) further acknowledges that:

In the case of the Hebrew Scriptures, to the extent that divine retribution is based on the presumably sound theological notion that the deity has the right to punish the people, the image of a husband physically retaliating against his wife becomes almost unavoidable, and his right to do so unquestionable (87).



Israelite men did indeed feel it was their God-given right to have dominance over women, as reflected in Biblical literature — for example 2 Samuel 11 that narrates the story of David and Bathsheba. The «marriage metaphor» constantly appears as example of how Yahweh interacts with humanity. Just as a wife is to be submissive to her husband, so God's people were to be submissive to their «Spiritual Husband.» If they were not, then there would be serious consequences for disobedience. On the surface, this would seem to be an effective metaphor that would only encourage the Israelites to trust and obey their God. Yet, considering the number of times the Hebrew Bible prophets had to use this metaphor, it is fair to say that the «marriage metaphor» had probably lost its effectiveness. As Moughtin-Mumby (2008) asserts:

I would like to point that the (unfaithful) wife of Yahweh includes both the men and women of Israel. That God was the husband in a metaphor that originated in a patriarchal society where women were not only supposed to be submissive, but also very much in need of protection, hardly calls for comment (2).

This overused metaphor by the Hebrew Bible prophets of the broken marriage between God and Israel may have stirred fear in some of the men, but clearly it did not capture the imagination of many as the metaphor itself may have been faulty from the beginning.

If males were to be seen in the role of the «unfaithful wife» in the broken «marriage metaphor,» then given the fact that they were socialized to see themselves as superior to women meant the metaphor could not have had much resonance in a patriarchal culture. However, MacWilliam (2011) in analyzing the «marriage metaphor» indeed points to its homosocial tone. In other words, if Israelites — the audience of the prophets — were male, the «marriage metaphor» then could be a queer one, as both the people of Israel and YHWH are males (2011: 79. See also Córdova Quero, 2014), thus questioning even its hetero-normative tone.



Moughtin-Mumby (2008) also highlights the misogynist tone of the «marriage metaphor»: «The metaphor constitutes an act of religious propaganda anchored in preconceptions of gender relations and the nature of female sexuality which reinforces a vision of negative female sexuality as against positive or neutral male sexuality» (2). The use of the «marriage metaphor» as a means of encouraging spiritual faithfulness among the Israelites gave rise to another, possibly unintended effect for the nation's women. In this fashion, Rut Tornkvist (1998) writes:

What makes prophetic text so dangerous for women is that they have been interpreted as 'proof text' and used to define and describe females and wives as generally morally and sexually corrupt, so females/women are consequently to be punished by males, i.e. husbands and other male authorities, and in the outermost instance by the husband *par preference*, Yahweh himself. What seems to be only fiction and symbols are cruel reality for a great deal of women, and symbols and metaphors have their connections and starting points in reality (16).

The «playing the whore» metaphor was used often by so many Hebrew Bible writers, that a doctrine developed about «whores» needing be punished without mercy. This then led to the question, who was considered a whore and how does one determine marital unfaithfulness as featured in the «marriage metaphor»? Men, of course, were considered the experts to answer these questions and women paid the price, as Keefe (2001) explains: «In Hosea and other prophetic texts, fornication functions as a primary trope for national sin, and in the legal codes characterize acts of betrayal, apostasy and faithlessness to Yahweh» (168). Just as Israelite women were to be chaste and faithful to their husband, this same quality was to be found among God's people.

The «purity» of the female body became symbolic of the desired purity of the nation of Israel and thus keeping the women chaste was of the utmost importance. This fact could be seen in the case of an Israelite women who was violated sexually. That act was cause for retaliation by the men in her life who were seen as her protectors. Keefe (2001) states:



The female body represents the social body in Gen. 34, where Dinah's body figures as the site for the expression of early Israel's historical experience of vulnerability to being dominated and absorbed by urban Canaanite culture. Rape signifies war in biblical narratives not only because the sexual transgression of women induces and therefore aptly represents a disintegration of relations between men, but also because the female body, as they generative source of the life of the community, metonymically represents the social body (175).

Of course, this places a tremendous amount of pressure on the backs of women to be the representatives of «national honor and purity.» As Keefe (2001) concludes for the book of Hosea:

In Hosea, the trope involves not only sexual transgression, but *female* sexual transgression. Female sexuality is as both as powerful as it is dangerous, and therefore in need of being controlled. In the Bible there is a fear of women's reproductive power and an equally strong desire to appropriate it. For example, the story of the concubine in Judges 19 has this woman leaving her husband. By leaving her husband the woman makes a gesture of sexual autonomy so threatening to patriarchal ideology that it requires her to be punished sexually in the most extreme form. The symbolic significance of dismembering the woman's body lies in its intent to de-sexualize her. The rape and dismemberment of this unnamed woman is seen as a 'fitting' punishment for her crime of asserting her sexual autonomy (171).

As a matter of fact, when national honor was lost, it was the Israelite people who paid the price, whether it was actually the sins of the people or the sins of their leaders. For example, 2 Samuel 24 narrates David's sin of pride by taking a national census and the price of losing the life of his son. When it was male honor that was lost, it was women who paid the price, whether it was actually the sins of the woman or not. Thus it became common to punish women by stripping them of their honor and purity by slandering them as «whores» in order to maintain the honor of the male — much in the same way Yahweh's righteous reputation always needed to be maintained among the people.



The Great Whore of Babylon

Another image of a wanton whore is found in the New Testament in the book of Revelations. This «Great Prostitute» — although symbolic of evil incarnate — knows how to have a good time as she is portrayed as the ultimate party girl:

With whom the kings of the earth have committed fornication, and with the wine of whose fornication the inhabitants of the earth have become drunk. The woman was clothed in purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and jewels and pearls, holding in her hand a golden cup full of abominations and the impurities of her fornication; and on her forehead was written a name, a mystery: “Babylon the great, mother of whores and of earth’s abominations” (Rev 17. 2, 4, 5).

These verses, read in isolation, could be played in either direction — a fearful larger than life image of a beast or a huge whore who is a siren for a «big spender daddy» who knows how to make a girl have a good time. The interpretation of this passage would depend upon the person’s orientation. Jennifer Glancy and Stephen Moore (2011) explain:

Nudity was the marker of the lowest whore, a woman who was said to be ready for every kind of lust. The whores in a squalid brothel would also be naked, and Juvenal [an author] describes this sort of harlot as ‘The whore that stands naked in a reeking archway’ (558).

Many Bible scholars would scoff at the idea that someone could get sexually aroused by these apocalyptic horrors. However, Glacey and Moore (2011) continue to unfold in their research that the Apostle John’s vision actually had basis in reality. They write:



Classicist C. R Jones suggested more than two decades ago that ‘The author [of Revelation] perhaps imagines the Woman not only as a whore, but as a whore of the most degraded kind, a tattooed slave.’ In Roman culture, a tattoo was ordinarily ‘a sign of degradation.’ Slaves were a class of persons with whom tattoos were especially associated. Tattooed inscription could at times be extensive, as in the description of the freedman ‘who had, not a face, but a narrative on his face, the mark of his masters harshness. The fact that facial tattooing (and even branding) would have been part and parcel of the brutal reality of slave prostitution in the Roman world, a brothel slave with a punitive facial tattoo would not have been anomalous’ (559).

Whether these images of the «Great Whore» cause fear or fantasy in the minds of the readers is not the main point. A larger issue superseding this apocalyptic warning is the impact it has on those who are labeled «prostitute.» Clearly, the message is that the «whore» gets what she deserves in the end – which is humiliation and death. This message has real life consequences that many «good church-going» folks do not see. Rather than promoting a doctrine of punishment to those who are «whores,» we cannot ignore or actively participate in the suppression of sex workers. An open mind and compassion is needed. Glancy and Moore (2011) further explain:

The story of Babylon's demise is the story of a great many sex workers in every age, including our own. She is the victim of deadly violence on the part of her clients and her pimp, the beast: ‘And the ten horns that you saw, they and the beast will loathe the whore, and they will ravage her and strip her naked, and they will devour her flesh and burn her with fire’ (568).

In the same vein, Ipsen in her book *Sex Working and the Bible* (2009) states: «Literalized sexual metaphors can obfuscate the identity of real villains» (208).

It is one thing to have Bible studies about metaphors from the Hebrew Bible and prophecies from the New Testament. It is another matter all together when these words from scriptures are used to form opinions and prejudices against others. All it would take is a jealous husband to read this commentary and believe he is



justified in taking the law into his own hands by punishing his «unfaithful» wife as God will do someday to the «Whore of Babylon,» as shown in the case of femicides. Concurrently, it could lead for a man to feel he is justified in abusing sex workers *after he has had sex* with them by not paying them or physically harming them. These are real occurrences that can easily find their justification in the pages of the sacred text.

Real Villains

The Christian churches' impressions of the prostitutes have not changed much over the centuries. Prostitutes share the same category as the fornicator, the cheating tax collector, those who practice witchcraft and the homosexuals — all of whom received churches' sanctioned oppression. While there has been considerable scholarship and contemporary thought on these later identities to make these people more compassionate to Christians, the identity of the prostitute tends to receive very little scholarship that would inspire compassion, as Ipsen (2009) categorically states: «The problem of omission of prostitutes exists in many academic disciplines» (206). In fact, in my research for this article, I came across a book entitled *Prostitution and Morality: The Causes and Effects of the Suppression of Prostitution* by Harry Benjamin and Robert Masters (1964). This theological study even had a medical doctor write the book's «Forward.» In their «compassionate» words, these authors wrote:

Prostitution seems to many as an attractively easy, undisciplined way of life. A minimum of intelligence and initiative are required from the prostitute who is content to simply 'get by'. Thus the field naturally is a catch-all for the lazy, the mentally deficient, the inadequate (but not necessarily severely disturbed) personalities, etc. (94).

Expanding on the reasons for that situation, the authors include the following aspects:



Predisposing factors are such elements in the prostitutes background as the 'broken home', parental (especially maternal) promiscuity, approval or tolerance of prostitution in the immediate social milieu, and trauma productive of certain types of neuroses (1964: 90).

Furthermore, they continue their line of argumentation by also bringing the issue of race to the analysis:

Negro prostitutes – who probably now constitute a majority of all American women subsisting mainly, or entirely, on prostitution earnings – ordinarily become harlots because of the ease of the 'life' (as compared to other types of work open to them) and because promiscuity and prostitution are taken for granted in the neighborhoods where they grow up (1964: 103).

How many people in our modern day have similar opinions of sex workers that have never been challenged, but reinforced? Negative images of sex workers, beyond what is written in the sacred texts, have been around for a very long time – it is not called the world's oldest profession for nothing. Historians have traced back to the sixteenth century writings that spoke of the lives of prostitutes. There was evidence that society and the church not only tolerated prostitution, but supported it until a tragedy arose. As Kathryn Norberg (2013) explains:

With the rise of new urban cities, a class of men (clerics and bureaucrats) emerged that did not want to share their women with rowdy soldiers. They wanted a whore who reflected their own status and personified their superiority over common rabble. The high priced, cultivated and exclusive prostitute was born in Rome where the expression "courtesan" first surfaced at the papal court. These clerics attached to the Holy See could not marry so they sought out venal women to accompany them on their social rounds (398).

In fact, the author affirms that prostitutes were closely monitored and policed:



In sixteenth and seventeenth-century Rome and Venice, courtesans lived openly and led public lives. In the eighteenth century, the prostitute became a diseased and freakish 'creature' more like an animal than a woman and subject to special police and administrative procedures. Syphilis many believed was poisoning the artisan class and destroying the army (2013: 394).

With prostitutes deemed criminals by both the church and state, those who engaged in sex work went underground and created their own safe spaces. As long as many of these sex workers stayed isolated to their «Red Light Districts,» then law enforcement could contain them and agreements were often established for their safety so they could carry out their work. However, law enforcement did not always maintain their end of the bargain. Many social outcasts could turn to the church for sanctuary, but not so for many prostitutes. Ipsen (2009) defines this situation of violence towards prostitutes:

This violence is perceived by sex workers as heavily institutionalized via police, courts, prisons, the mental health establishment, and rehabilitation programs for prostitutes. These institutions often treat sex workers as moral imbeciles who need to be disciplined by the state and also do not extend equal protection to sex workers as citizens or full human beings (177-178).

In bringing the analysis to sacred scriptures, Ipsen (2009) states:

Even though biblical arguments used against prostitutes do not have much merit, religious institution continue to play a very important role in providing the ideological justification to repressive institutions interested in controlling the bodies of women, especially poor , non-white women (207).

By tracing the discourses in both sacred texts and history, one can unveil that the real villains of sex work are not the sex workers themselves. On the contrary, the epithet resides on those who by either political and ecclesiastical authority or self-righteousness deem sex workers as «lesser humans.» To change the predominately male driven institutions of the Christian churches is



a tremendous feat, yet we have an example of one man who sought to disrupt a faulty religious system, namely, Jesus.

A Compassionate Theology for the Sex Workers

It is the Spirit of the Living God that stirs sex workers' souls to take their place at the «Welcome Table.» Articulating this liberation for sex workers must come from both within their community and receive support from the outside, as Ipsen (2009) enunciates: «Probably the concept or phrase most associated with liberation theology is its 'preferential option' for the poor. This option has not been extended fully to prostitutes, a subcategory of the poor and oppressed» (13). Dignity for sex workers has long been overdue.

Sex workers, primarily women, have been created by society to contribute their art and skill for healing the soul through sexuality and tenderness. To open one's body, emotions and life to a stranger for the purpose of sex is — indeed — work. Many of these workers can be called «Sacred Prostitutes» because they work in the realm of healing the hearts and souls of those who come to receive aid. Sexuality is indeed a gift and it can also be abused by many, but there are people who are not able to meet potential partners to have intimate sexual relations with others. This is where a sex worker can provide a sexual outlet for those who may be socially awkward or disabled.

Unfortunately, this work will always carry with it an element of risk and danger — as many other occupations do as well. What is needed are protections and sanctuaries for these workers to revitalize their souls considering they give so much of themselves to others. On this, Ipsen (2009) declares: «The church and theologians including many liberation theologians, fail to let go of their essentialist ideals about women and family» (5). Communities of faith would do well to apply common sense to these stories of the women in the Bible who «play the whore» in order to see that their beliefs have been based upon a patriarchal frame that does not translate to the experience of most women of antiquity or modern times. The retelling and theological reframing of these Hebrew Bible cautionary tales to the nation of Israel of



their jealous husband/God needs to be *divorced* from comparisons to literal husband and wife marriages. Pete Diamond and Kathleen O'Connor (1996) explain:

Such psychological factors as male fears of female sexuality, betrayal, and loss of control over their wives that might contribute to such projection are beyond the scope of this inquiry. What can be said with certainty is that the metaphor reflects the “regimes of reason” that prevailed in ancient Israel. Because women were among the weakest members of the society, held little status, and were thought to be “other,” this metaphor can use them to shame the strong. By making God a husband, it also elevates husbands to the role of God (309).

Althaus-Reid (2004) also addresses this situation when stating:

It is interesting to notice that the main task of liberationist has been to remove Christian passivity and attitudes of resignation which were precisely brought to our people's lives by centuries of Christian theology. Therefore, if the world has enlightened the church and not, unfortunately vice versa, one of the main difficulties with Liberation Theology may lie in the fact of believing in the camera obscura effect. (79).

Jesus — in a role as liberator of humanity — is written to have shown compassion and acceptance to those who have been outcasts. Ipsen (2009) echoes this hope:

Our love for Jesus and our self-respect will help greatly our religious understanding, as will our knowledge that in the past we were very important people for Christ and for the formation of Christianity. *We want light to shine on our Christian story.* (5).

There is no question that Jesus accepted all people, including prostitutes, as seen with his interaction with the woman in Luke 7 . 36-50 known as the «Anointing Woman.»

However, the controversial question is: «Did Jesus require this woman to repent of her ‘whoring’ ways?» I believe the answer to the question can be deduced from reading the Luke passage in



context. The story that appears prior to the «Anointing Woman» is of Jesus showing compassion upon a widow whose son had just died (Lk 7.11-17). As her only source of income, this widow would have been destitute without the protection of her only son. Options available to this widow would have been limited. Quite possibly, sex work could have been an option for her to make money, as it was for many women who were left with very few options for survival. In a feminist-like reframe, this story has Jesus interrupting this ill fate and returns her son to her. This widow's economic status had just improved greatly in that healing moment.

Following the story of the «Anointing Woman,» Luke 8 begins with a crowd of women who are accepted as Christ's disciples, many of whom had questionable pasts. Similar to his male disciples, who also had questionable pasts, Jesus wholeheartedly welcomes these women to be his students (Lk 8.1-3). This was quite remarkable for a Rabbi to openly accept female students. Later in Luke 8.43-48 is another story that is even more remarkable: Jesus touches a woman who is unclean due to her menstrual flow. He informs this woman that because she sought him out, her faith brought her healing. For Jesus to have such radical interactions with women, proves that he was interested in interrupting the hetero-patriarchy that dominated them, an idea reflected in feminist theory. Since Jesus was labeled the «Son of God» (Lk 9.35), it can be concluded that God is interested in uplifting women and not into abusing them or called them simply «sinners» (Kitzberger, 1994: 198-199).

In terms of his interaction with the «Anointing Woman» in Luke 7.36-50, various scholars have provided their thoughts on the matter on what Jesus actually thought about this female follower. Barbara Reid (1996) questions:



But if one were predisposed to see in a female figure a potential disciple, or one who could prefigure the Christ, it is possible to envision the symbolic action in another direction. Her pouring out of the expensive ointment out of love prefigure Jesus' pouring out of his precious life-blood on behalf of those whom he loves (22:20)? There are further thematic connections between her story and the account of the death of Jesus. This woman is assured salvation (7:50), just as is the repentant criminal in 23:41-42; her tears stand in contrast to those of Peter, who weeps bitterly after denying Jesus (22:62); her kisses contrast to the betraying kiss of Judas (22:47); and her position at Jesus' feet is the stance of a servant. At the last supper Jesus instructs the disciples to "let the greatest among you be as the youngest, and the leader as the servant" (22:26), underscoring for them, "I am among you as the one who serves" (22:27) (122).

To this, Ipsen (2009) also interrogates the traditional interpretation of the "anointing woman":

The typical Christian interpretation assumes that the anointing woman is acting out of her feelings of repentance, however 'conversion – turning away from sinning – is a matter of both practicality and economy, which certainly was not possible for this woman. [...] Schottrof asserts that the story is showing us the proper way of relating to prostitutes, with love and solidarity (134).

I appreciate the last quote used by Ipsen. Looking at what is written in the text, Jesus does forgive the «Anointing Woman» of her sins, but does not tell her to no longer continue her line of work. Everyone needs to be forgiven from their sin and shame they carry, but unlike Matthew or Zacchaeus who were either told or prompted to «stop their cheating ways,» this prohibition from her line of work as a prostitute is absent. Many would argue that it is implied that in Jesus' forgiving this woman of her sins, she was told or prompted to leave her profession of sex work behind. This is possible; after all, the widow who received her son from death was spared a potential life as a sex worker. It is a shame that through life circumstances that some women, men, and transgender individuals are left with few options but to enter sex work to make money or simply survive. Yet, as shown by Ipsen, Luise Schottroff (1996) suggests that it is possible the woman who anointed Jesus'



feet was «gifted» to be a prostitute — a sacred prostitute. If this was her chosen line of work, then for her to leave it to do something else «more reputable» would have been very difficult, especially since she was already known as a prostitute.

Conclusion

As members of communities of faith, we must also be committed to seeking out ways to be more inclusive of those on the margins of society — especially those who are invisible like sex workers. I admire the work of Ipsen (2009) and other who help give voice to sex workers and bring them out of the shadows. Her insight into sex worker activism is a great place to be planted:

Prostitutes' rights activists frequently claim that special legislation around sex work ultimately works to penalize and re-victimize prostitutes rather than protect them. [...] [The abolition of prostitution laws] would allow prostitutes to function as citizens and to access many legal rights they are usually denied, such as police protection from violence, rape and other crimes, access to health care, and the right to migrate (2009: 22).

We also need to challenge the interpretation of our sacred texts that lead to the oppression of anyone. We have allowed scripture to be taught in ways that solidify patriarchy and diminish the role of women. As analyzed in this article, the metaphors and other teachings that have served the status quo of male domination have to be interrupted.

I believe if Christians re-read and followed the examples of Christ in touching the untouchable and loving the unlovable, we would be able to engage in disrupting false gender roles that have oppressed us all and allow everyone to be the individual they choose to be. In agreeing with Althaus-Reid (1997):



A practical feminist theology brings some light into what it means to develop systems of production and to live conditioned by them as part of our growing into false sex roles in society. This is why theologians must feel the urge to trespass, as a metaphor for the need of drastic, improvised changes. We must consider that human sexuality is disorderly, potentially chaotic and ambiguous; therefore, there is room potentially to reconsider an erotic economic model beyond dualism and power drives, while still encompassing love (50).

We must learn to disrupt the oppression of others wherever we find it, even if it is in our own homes, faith communities, or society. The real villains of sex work are not the individuals engaged in it but those who point the accusatory finger towards them. On the contrary, rather than oppressive tools, our theological reflection, Sacred Scriptures interpretation, and pastoral praxis should be liberating and embracing of gender and sexual justice. This is at the core of a compassionate theology for sex workers that incarnates God's inclusive love through the life and example of Jesus.

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