

UNIVERSITY

Author relates women, priesthood

By Regina Brown
For the Oregon Daily Emerald

Students, professors and members of the community gathered to hear Dr. Karen Jo Torjesen, author of *When Women Were Priests* and a Claremont Graduate School professor, lecture last week on how women's roles changed during the formation of Christianity.

Torjesen spoke about the influence of the Greco-Roman gender system on Christianity and how this system's adoption repressed women and kept them from acquiring leadership positions.

During the formative years of Christianity, Torjesen said women held prominent leadership positions and were often bishops, priests and influential prophetesses.

"We have documentation of women priests and bishops all the way through the 13th century," she said.

Women's leadership roles in the early church result from the gender segregation of Roman society.

"The household was considered the women's sphere," Torjesen said. "But it was a very powerful sphere because all the economic activity and productivity was located in the household."

Women had no power outside the home. The business and public aspects of life revolved around men. During the early days of Christianity, Christians met in private homes. This gave women ample opportunity for religious leadership roles, Torjesen said.

The formation of Christianity was deeply affected by the Roman gender system, which equated honor with masculinity and shame with women.

A woman's honor depended on her reputation for chastity shown through her sense of shame and concern for her reputation. Women were expected to stay inside where men could not see them.

"(There is) the chaste woman, who is the private woman, and the public woman, who is the unchaste woman," Torjesen said. "Honor was the highest social good of Mediterranean societies."

"Male honor carries with it particular privileges associated with public political life. The right to speak (publicly) creates a male domain and a male sphere," Torjesen said. "A woman's speech must be private because public speech is the instrument of power and political authority. A woman who gains 'male' honor is thereby shamed."

Women of the early church, as well as women today, saw in Jesus Christ a new identity for themselves, Torjesen said. They believed Christ preached equality for all and that because of this, women are not inferior to men. Therefore they should not be forced to follow a set of social standards they considered to be repressive.

When religious activities moved out of the home in the fourth century and into buildings built specifically for worship, Torjesen said, women began to lose their roles as religious leaders. Male religious leaders began to criticize women who took leadership roles, calling them, among other things, "dishonorable and disorderly."

Torjesen spoke of a letter written by a male bishop in response to the activities of a particular female prophet. "She was given the name Jezebel, which invokes a very powerful sexual image ... she was cast as a seductress. Her teaching was described as fornication."

Torjesen said that male church leaders often gave disparaging sexual qualities to female religious leaders and that time period was "typical of rhetoric sexualizing a woman leader."

"The whole issue of theological difference when it focuses on a woman leader is sexualized," Torjesen said.

This sexualizing of women leaders arose out of "an understanding of gender roles and the gender personality that is common to Mediterranean societies," she said. "It's a gender system that associates honor with masculinity and shame with femininity."

Knowledge of this system is necessary in order to "analyze the organization of masculinity and femininity that is built under the title of honor and shame as a way of interpreting early Christian texts," said Torjesen.

These attitudes are alive today, Torjesen said. They can be seen in the reluctance of many Christian religions to ordain women or to accept them as leaders.

"The whole issue of sexualizing women, especially when it comes to positions of religious leadership, is still very volatile in our society," she said. "This is something that I'm arguing is inherent of the gender system."

Torjesen said that Christianity in general does not critically analyze society's attitudes toward gender.

"Christian theologians have basically taken the Roman gender system and given it a Christian baptism," she said. "(They) have tried to make it an essential part of the Christian faith without asking the question, 'is there anything distinctly Christian about this?'"

But Torjesen also sees opportunity for change.

"Christianity, certainly in gender, tends to follow the lead of the culture it's in," she said. "And so as increasingly larger roles for women open in American society, I think American Christianity will simply follow suit as (Christianity did) 2,000 years ago in adopting the Roman attitudes toward gender."

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