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# Women and Religion: A Critical Analysis of Gender Roles and Religious Norms

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper investigates the intersection of religion and gender, specifically examining how religious doctrines, traditions, and institutions have historically influenced the status and roles of women. While many religions claim spiritual equality, the practical application of religious norms often perpetuates patriarchal structures. However, women are not merely passive subjects within religion; many have challenged and transformed religious interpretations to promote gender justice. This study draws on feminist theology, religious texts, and global case studies to explore both the oppressive and empowering aspects of religion in relation to women.*

## KEYWORDS

*Women, Religion, Gender, Feminism, Justice*

## INTRODUCTION

Religion is a powerful cultural and social force that has shaped human history, values, and identity. It provides ethical guidance, community belonging, and existential purpose. However, when analyzing the status of women within religious frameworks, contradictions often emerge. On one hand, religions promise spiritual equality, compassion, and justice; on the other, they have been used to legitimize gender inequality, restrict women's autonomy, and justify patriarchal control. The central question this paper explores is: How have religious beliefs and practices affected the lives and roles of women, and can religious reform serve as a means to achieve gender equality? <sup>1</sup>Using examples from major world religions—Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Judaism, and Buddhism—this research analyzes both the institutionalized limitations and the potential for female

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<sup>1</sup> Amina Wadud. *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective*. Oxford University Press.

empowerment embedded in religious traditions.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: FEMINIST THEOLOGY AND HUMAN RIGHTS**

Feminist theology emerged in the 20th century as a response to the patriarchal interpretations of religious texts and traditions. It questions the male-dominated narrative of religious history and calls for inclusive and egalitarian reinterpretations. Thinkers like Mary Daly, Fatima Mernissi, Amina Wadud, and Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza have argued for a re-reading of scriptures through the lens of gender justice. Human rights frameworks also intersect with this discussion. International conventions such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW, 1979)<sup>2</sup> assert gender equality, yet they frequently come into tension with religious customs protected under the right to cultural and religious freedom.

## **WOMEN IN MAJOR WORLD RELIGIONS**

### **1. *Hinduism***

Hinduism offers a complex picture of women. Ancient texts like the Vedas and Upanishads contain both reverence and regulation. Goddesses such as Durga, Saraswati, and Lakshmi are symbols of strength, knowledge, and wealth. The concept of Shakti embodies divine feminine energy. However, the same tradition also relegates women to subordinate positions in social and family life. Manu Smriti, a Dharmashastra text, proclaims that a woman should always be under the authority of a male—father, husband, or son. The practice of sati, child marriage, and the dowry system, though not scripturally mandated, were justified through religious norms. Modern reform movements, from the Brahmo Samaj to contemporary Hindu feminists, have challenged such injustices, calling for reinterpretation of texts in the light of equality and human dignity.

### **2. *Islam***

Islamic texts, particularly the Quran, assert the spiritual equality of men and women (Quran 33:35). Early Islamic history includes prominent women like Khadijah (the Prophet's wife) and Aisha (a scholar and political leader). However, interpretations of Sharia law have varied across cultures and times. Patriarchal customs, such as forced veiling, restricted mobility, and unequal

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<sup>2</sup> United Nations, *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, 1948; CEDAW, 1979.

inheritance, often derive more from local cultures than from Islamic doctrine. Feminist scholars like <sup>3</sup>Amina Wadud and Fatima Mernissi argue that male-centric interpretations have distorted the egalitarian spirit of Islam. Movements such as Musawah (“equality” in Arabic) have emerged globally to promote gender justice within an Islamic framework.

### **3. Christianity**

Christianity has deeply influenced Western civilization and gender norms. While Jesus Christ treated women with respect and included them among his followers, Church history has largely sidelined female leadership. Women like Mary Magdalene were initially portrayed as important disciples, but were later stigmatized by the institutional Church. The Catholic Church still prohibits women from becoming priests, whereas some Protestant denominations have begun to ordain women. Feminist theologians such as Rosemary Radford Ruether and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza advocate for a return to the inclusive message of the Gospels, emphasizing love, justice, and liberation.

### **4. Judaism**

In Orthodox Judaism, strict gender roles persist, including gender-segregated religious spaces and exclusion from rabbinical roles. Women are exempt from many religious obligations due to traditional roles as caretakers. However, Reform and Conservative branches of Judaism have made significant strides in gender equality. Women now serve as rabbis, scholars, and community leaders in many Jewish communities. Jewish feminist thinkers like Judith <sup>4</sup>Plaskow have challenged traditional interpretations and encouraged a re-examination of the Torah and Talmud from a woman’s perspective.

### **5. Buddhism**

Buddhism, in its original teachings, promotes equality and detachment from worldly distinctions, including gender. However, institutional Buddhism often mirrors the patriarchal cultures in which it evolved. The Buddha initially resisted but later permitted the ordination of women (Bhikkhunis), albeit with additional restrictions. Today, in Theravāda countries like Thailand and Sri Lanka, female monasticism remains marginalized. In contrast, Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna traditions have recognized female teachers and spiritual leaders. Contemporary Buddhist feminists

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<sup>3</sup> Fatima Mernissi. *The Veil and the Male Elite*. Perseus

<sup>4</sup> Judith Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1990).

argue for the revival of full ordination and equal respect for female practitioners.

### **RELIGION AS A SITE OF OPPRESSION**

In many societies, religion has been used to justify systemic violence against women. Practices such as honor killings, female genital mutilation, child marriage, and the restriction of education and employment are often culturally embedded but cloaked in religious justification. In Afghanistan under Taliban rule, for instance, girls were barred from education and forced into marriages based on strict interpretations of Islamic law. In India, honor crimes are often linked to caste and religious codes of purity. Christian institutions have historically suppressed women's sexuality and autonomy under the guise of morality and sin.

### **RELIGION AS A SITE OF EMPOWERMENT**

Despite the historical and ongoing presence of patriarchal structures within religious institutions, religion has also functioned as a profound source of empowerment, resilience, and transformation for countless women around the world. Far from being mere passive recipients of religious doctrine, many women have actively engaged with, interpreted, and even reshaped religious beliefs to support gender equality and social justice. Religion, in this context, can offer a moral and spiritual framework that legitimizes resistance to oppression and motivates social action. It also provides communal networks, ritual spaces, and ethical narratives through which women can assert their agency. One notable example is Sister Nivedita (Margaret Elizabeth Noble), a disciple of Swami Vivekananda, who played a crucial role in the Hindu reform movements in colonial India. Born in Ireland and initially educated in Western Christian traditions, she embraced Hindu spirituality and worked tirelessly to promote girls' education and social reform in India. Sister Nivedita used Hindu ideals of Shakti (divine feminine power) and Indian nationalism to advocate for the upliftment of women, blending religious values with social activism. Her work highlights how religious symbolism and theology can be reinterpreted to challenge colonialism and patriarchy simultaneously.

Similarly, Malala Yousafzai, a Pakistani education activist and Nobel Peace Prize laureate, draws directly upon Islamic principles to support her advocacy for girls' right to education. In her speeches and writings, Malala frequently cites Quranic verses that emphasize the importance of knowledge, the equality of all believers, and the moral responsibility of both men and women to seek learning. By grounding her activism in Islamic teachings, she

effectively challenges extremist interpretations of Islam that seek to deny women their basic rights. Her example demonstrates how religious identity can serve as both a personal source of strength and a rhetorical strategy to gain legitimacy and reach broader audiences within religious communities. In Latin America, particularly in countries like Brazil, Nicaragua, and El Salvador, many Christian women have found empowerment through Liberation Theology, a movement within Catholicism that emphasizes the role of the Church in addressing poverty, injustice, and social inequality. Women in this movement often reinterpret the life and teachings of Jesus Christ as a call to activism and solidarity with the oppressed. Female leaders have emerged within base ecclesial communities, small grassroots Christian groups, where they engage in biblical reflection, community organizing, and political advocacy. Through this involvement, many women have discovered their voices as leaders, theologians, and agents of change, even in contexts where official church doctrine still limits female leadership roles. In the Buddhist Himalayas, women have long struggled for recognition and equality within monastic traditions.

The Bhikkhuni (female monastic) order, established by the Buddha but later suppressed in many Theravāda countries, is being revived by women seeking spiritual and institutional parity. In regions such as Ladakh, Bhutan, Nepal, and northern India, Buddhist nuns are now engaging in advanced philosophical training, community service, and environmental activism. The establishment of nunneries like Tibetan Nuns Project and Dongyu Gatsal Ling Nunnery, founded by Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo, provides educational and spiritual opportunities previously denied to women. These nuns are not only reclaiming their religious rights but also emerging as influential voices for peace, compassion, and social transformation. A significant tool in this empowerment process is the reinterpretation of sacred texts through feminist hermeneutics. Women scholars across religious traditions are engaging deeply with scriptures, questioning patriarchal interpretations, and uncovering egalitarian themes previously overlooked or suppressed.

For example, Christian feminist theologians have highlighted women leaders in the early Church; Muslim feminists have reanalyzed Quranic verses with an emphasis on justice and equity; Jewish women have revisited Torah and Talmudic texts to expose inclusive ethical teachings; and Hindu feminists have drawn attention to the empowering roles of goddesses and female sages. These efforts reveal that many religious traditions contain transformative moral and spiritual resources capable of supporting human dignity and gender justice when interpreted

with an inclusive lens. In all these contexts, faith becomes more than a private spiritual experience—it becomes a political, ethical, and communal force that enables women to challenge injustice, articulate their identities, and participate fully in both religious and public life. Far from being a monolithic source of oppression, religion—when critically engaged—can be a dynamic site of liberation and empowerment.

## **GLOBAL MOVEMENTS AND CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES**

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, religious fundamentalism poses a significant challenge to gender equality. The rise of extremist ideologies has intensified control over women's bodies, dress, and public presence. However, digital platforms have enabled global networks of religious feminists, scholars, and activists to connect and collaborate. Campaigns such as #WomenInMosques and Ordain Women (Mormon Church) have garnered international attention. Interfaith dialogues, legal reforms, and academic scholarship continue to challenge oppressive traditions and promote inclusive religious practices.

## **CONCLUSION**

The relationship between women and religion is multifaceted, marked by both subjugation and strength. While religious institutions have historically reinforced gender hierarchies, they also contain the seeds of liberation and justice. Women are not merely subjects of religious narratives—they are interpreters, reformers, and leaders. For real gender justice, religious texts must be reinterpreted in their ethical, spiritual essence rather than through patriarchal traditions. Promoting religious literacy, gender-sensitive theology, and inclusive policy reforms is crucial in achieving an equitable society where both faith and freedom coexist.

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