

## 1.8 IS CHRISTIANITY BETTER OR WORSE FOR WOMEN THAN OTHER RELIGIONS?

Feminists are rightly tempted to classify all religions as irredeemably patriarchal. It is more correct and more complicated to understand that the overarching problem is patriarchy. Religion has been one of the many institutions that patriarchy uses as a tool to justify and maintain the beliefs and practices that subordinate women. Because of that, most religions that exist in the contemporary world are those that have survived under global patriarchy: They are religions that support or have posed little threat to patriarchy. Looking more closely, examples from the other two Abrahamic traditions as well as some Eastern religions show that every religion has its own strengths and inherent limitations when it comes to a liberating life for women and men.

Christianity, Judaism, and Islam trace their roots back to the patriarch Abraham and the stories of his wives and sons recorded in Genesis and in the Quran. These three religions therefore share some foundations, but historically they created and maintained different cultures as well as theologies. Like Christianity, Judaism throughout history and today is a diverse religion with varying traditions within it. Reform Judaism allows for the ordination of women as rabbis, while Orthodox Judaism does not and places strict limitations on the public interactions of men and women. Reconstructionist Jews present alternate interpretations of Leviticus's injunctions against male-male sex, while in March 2007 the Jewish Theological Seminary, the premiere educational institution in Conservative Judaism, announced that it was accepting

qualified gay and lesbian students after a long process of discernment regarding the halakhic status of homosexuality.<sup>25</sup>

Jewish feminists such as Judith Plaskow and Susannah Heschel have been engaging in the scholarly critique of their religious tradition for decades and point out that an important legacy of women's activism in Judaism exists. Judith Baskin's 1991 book *Jewish Women in Historical Perspective* provides rich resources for understanding the roles and contributions of women throughout the religion's long history. Even just this broad characterization of traditions within Judaism shows that as in Christianity, so in Judaism one can find a full range of positions and perspectives on issues like women in leadership and restrictions on sexuality.

Questions about women's rights and roles within Islam is complicated by a difference of theology as well as by the political history of the religion's existence and a set of misperceptions that infect the West. While there are divisions within the religious tradition of Islam, most notably Sunni and Shi'a, the political and cultural distinctions between countries and regions are often more definitive for women in the religion. The early twenty-first century also brings with it the reality of Western occupation of Muslim countries that affects any discussion of Islam by those of us in the West. Specifically, Laura Bush's radio address in November 2001 linked the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, a proportionate response to the country that harbored al Qaeda after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, to the liberation of women: "The fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women."<sup>26</sup> This attempt to justify

25. Eisen, "Letter to the JTS Community," par. 1.; and Alpert, "Same Sex Marriage and the Law."

26. Bush, "Radio Address," para. 4.

military exercises by tying them to the liberation of women in Muslim cultures was not a new tactic; it had been used by the British colonial empire throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Because of this history, Western discourse about the status of women in Islam is affected by cultural baggage and lack of historical awareness. More information about contemporary reality and the religion itself is required in order for Westerners to speak intelligently about the place of women in Islam.

One source for information about the Muslim world today is *The Gallup World Poll*, which includes data from more than 130 countries and areas, including face-to-face interviews with people in thirty-five nations that are predominantly Muslim. This sample represents “more than 90% of the world’s 1.3 billion Muslims.”<sup>27</sup> Among other things, the data show that “majorities of women in virtually every country we surveyed say that women deserve the same legal rights as men, to vote without influence from family members, to work at any job they are qualified for, and even to serve in the highest levels of government.”<sup>28</sup> In addition, the majority of men in the Muslim world agree, though sometimes in slightly lower percentages (e.g., in Iran, 87 percent of men and 91 percent of women believe that women should be allowed to vote).<sup>29</sup> The polling also found no correlation between the degree of religiosity and disagreement with women’s equality. In fact, contrary to popular assumption, the report points out that “in Lebanon, Morocco, and Iran, men who support women’s rights are found to be more religious than those who do not

27. Esposito and Mogahed, *Who Speaks for Islam?* xi.

28. *Ibid.*, 101–2.

29. *Ibid.*, 121.

support women's rights."<sup>30</sup> Information like this goes a long way toward dispelling presumptions about Islam and about Muslim attitudes toward women.

One reason for these seemingly progressive attitudes is the sincere belief by many Muslims that Islam is fundamentally a religion based on justice and the equality of all humans before God. Scholars of the religion make this case. Amina Wadud as well as many other Islamic experts point out that the meaning of the term *islam* is "surrender," and the only one to whom Muslims fully surrender is Allah. To have to surrender to another human being would violate the order of creation. For that reason alone, Islam presents a theological picture in which men and women and all persons are on equal footing under Allah. This theology is often misconstrued and misunderstood by Westerners, leading to false assumptions about the source of oppression for women in Islamic countries.

At the same time, most traditions of Islam do not allow women to be imams, or public leaders in prayer services, though there has been activism on this front by women like Wadud. It also remains painfully true that women in Islamic countries suffer persecution and gender-based violence. In many of these cases, distinguishing the source of women's oppression as religious or political is difficult, in part because of the theocratic nature of Islam: the Taliban in Afghanistan wants to prevent girls from going to school, and one was assaulted with acid for trying to do so in 2008;<sup>31</sup> Wahhabi leaders in Saudi Arabia do not allow women to drive; after the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran, women's lives were increasingly restricted and their public movements controled; mandates

30. Ibid., 123.

31. Khan, "10 Taliban Arrested."

for public dress in some Muslim countries disproportionately burden women; after decades of wars in Iraq, millions of widows are left to live in poverty amid destruction and desolation.<sup>32</sup> The intimate relationship of religion and politics makes it difficult to solely blame Islam for these realities, and it is clear that like Christianity, Islam has a mixed legacy when it comes to the treatment of women.

Beyond the Western world and Abrahamic religions, there are a vast array of religions cut from wholly different cultural and historical cloth. Buddhism and Hinduism share some territory and ideology, while religions such as Shinto and Jainism exist in relatively smaller numbers and more isolated contexts. Exploration of topics related to women in these religions does not fit easily into the categories like leadership, equality, and sexuality that have so far been discussed. Hinduism, for example, has a wide array of gods and goddesses, who play different roles in the world and in the heavens. It does not have one founder or single set of beliefs that are easily evaluated, having emerged in India over the past several thousand years. The caste system of Hinduism mitigates against full human equality for many people, not just women, and the cultural record of India's treatment of women includes female infanticide as well as low female literacy and marriage of young girls.

Nevertheless, India and Hinduism contain a range of opposing realities and beliefs about women, including that women serve at the highest levels of government as well as that women have some of the lowest standards of living in the world. A U.N. Report on the status of women in India showcases some of these seeming contradictory facts: the

32. I.R.I.N., "Iraq: Widow Numbers Rise," para. 4.

majority of women in India live their entire lives in a state of “nutritional stress,” while India elected a female prime minister and was one of the first countries in the world to give women the right to vote.<sup>33</sup> India is a vast and varied country, and Hinduism has been a major factor in the culture. Again we are left with the question of how much the religion has affected the social and material conditions of women’s lives.

Buddhism’s emphasis on selflessness, acting with good intentions, and a nontheistic set of beliefs can suggest a religion with less embedded sexism than Western and monotheistic religions. It is also true that Buddhism contains prescriptions and rituals based on the presumed uncleanness of women, especially when they are menstruating. Such a view has been common to a variety of religions historically, when women’s bodily functions were less scientifically understood and more culturally taboo. At the same time, Buddhists sometimes claim that theirs was the first major world religion to recognize the full spiritual equality of women and men, and women are now ordained as nuns at several levels within some forms of Buddhism.<sup>34</sup> Again, a mixed picture emerges with women’s full equality existing alongside traditions and practices that suggest male superiority.

From this wide-ranging collection of examples and information from religions around the world, concluding whether Christianity is better or worse for women is nearly impossible. The treatment and views of women in any religion are inevitably tied to specific factors like time, place, family,

33. Menon-Sen and Kumar, “Women in India: How Free? How Equal?” 7-8.

34. Buddha Dharma Education Association, “Buddhism and Women.”

resources, and politics. No religion has a fully negative or fully positive legacy when it comes to women's lives. One thing that is clear is that the status of women in all religions ranges from wholly oppressed or excluded to wholly affirmed and included. Insofar as religions around the world and throughout history have contributed to both the affirmation and denigration of women, they all deserve careful attention from feminists in the third wave.

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*Christianity is incredibly similar to other religions when it comes to women: A wide range of views and treatment of women has always been connected to an intricate set of historical and political factors that can both completely affirm as well as completely subordinate and mistreat women.*

#### SUGGESTED READING

Judith Baskin, editor. *Jewish Women in Historical Perspective*. 1991.

John Esposito and Daria Mogahed. *Who Speaks for Islam?* 2007.

Rita Gross and Rosemary Radford Ruether. *Religious Feminism and the Future of the Planet*. 2001.

Amina Wadud. *Quran and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective*. 1999.