

If god is male, then
the male is god

Religion



Religion, since the beginning of human civilization, has always been one of the most influential factors for the shaping of society. Its impact has gone far beyond the mere intrusion of culture and lifestyle, for it has been and still remains a strictly formulated mindset which governs the everyday behavior of the majority of the planet's population. In fact, religion has had a more influential role in determining the social roles and stereotypes of genders than any other field of cultural studies.

Nearly two millennia after the supposed death of Christ, we still haven't resolved the conflict between the seemingly egalitarian teachings of Jesus and the history of sexist bans and prosecutions of women which were to follow in later centuries. It seems that Christianity, although its promotion of equality and love for all human beings alike, has actually failed these virtues by endorsing symbolic and ritual practices which denigrate femininity by denying women an unmediated relationship with the various aspects of the divine. But is it truly so?

In order to examine the question of the misbalance in gender egalitarianism, we first must consider the societal structures which are connected to Christianity and whether or not they might favor an inequality between the genders. The first religions of mankind, which arose during the early Paleolithic, possessed an intriguing quality - not only that they didn't show a preference for male over female, but treated the genders as interchangeable in the sphere of divinity, thus making the images of the God and the Goddess equally important (Gilbert-Rogers).

With the development of agriculture, the image of the Mother Goddess took over as the main worshipped deity due to her being of an embodiment of fertility, protection and love. The end of the era of veneration of the female principle as birth-giving and all-encompassing came with the invasions of nomadic Asian and Northern European tribes in the 4th millennium BCE (Gilbert-Rogers). New cults were created, many of which worshiped a male god abiding in the sky as their most significant figure.

The introduction of male gods wasn't the novelty which these cults introduced; it was the notion of moral dualism which came along with them (Gilbert-Rogers). Previously, all opposing pairs in nature such as male-female, light-dark, hot-cold had been regarded as consisting of equally important elements; the one part needed the other in order to exist, it was defined by it. However, the situation was changing, and the non-judgmental natural dualism was substituted by a morally-guided one in which one of the opposites was regarded as better than the other.

This was a major turning point in both society and religion which established the bond between moral good, masculinity and power. Though strictly monotheistic religions did not exist at the time, a tendency of male superiority in the pantheons of various cults and religions was gradually growing stronger – Ra and Zeus replaced the primal gods of creation, more and more sects and cults were starting to prefer one single deity over all the others.

Similar patterns were observable in society as well – queens steadily started losing their influence in the royal courts becoming beautiful adornments to

their spouses rather than trusted advisors and co-rulers. By the time Jesus was born, Judaism was a fully-developed monotheistic religion based around male authority and pretty much the same could be said about the ruling principles of the Roman Empire. The second of the Abrahamic religions was created in a time when the belief that men are superior to women was so deeply rooted in all aspects of human life that it was highly unlikely for it to argue for absolute gender egalitarianism.

Although there is no passage in the Bible which explicitly states the absolute dominance of male over female, one is indisputably left with the feeling that men have a stronger connection with the Christian God. Starting with the Old Testament, the tendency to present men as closer to the Lord is evident. The first human being to be created is a man, the first generation of offspring he produces with his wife is all-male, all records of genealogy are entirely patrilineal, all great leaders and decision-makers are men as well, and all covenants God makes with the human kind are made in the presence of men only.

Of course, women are not entirely isolated from the ongoing events, but their influence is usually limited to supporting their families and communities rather than being in direct contact with the Lord. The same trend is present in the New Testament; beside the figures of the Holy Mother Mary, Mary Magdalene and Martha, few women are mentioned by name and referred to as examples of proper followers of Christ's teachings.

The very fact that Jesus in his human appearance is male is of utmost importance if not for the very foundations of Christianity, then at least for the

theologians and scholars to interpret its messages in the centuries to come. Mary Daly's quote "If God is male, then the male is God" is a brief yet precise summary of the intricate connection between masculinity and divinity Christianity creates based on predominant male presence and the heavy usage of male-related symbols in the Holy Scripture.

This statement strongly relates to two major issues linked to gender inequality in religion. The first of them has to do with the level of uncertainty which the quote allows: is it only a theoretical question which is posed by suggesting what will happen if masculinity and divinity are intertwined, or is it a reality which the global society (even in its non-Christian parts) has accepted as a natural state of affairs and therefore has no motivation to change.

Could it be that it's too late to alter the perception of the public by revising what has been written by the prominent thinkers of the past and trying to relate it to the latest ideas regarding the equal rights and abilities of all people despite differences in gender, race or social background? The second issue, however, is even more alarming. Going back to the idea of moral dualism, it is clear that once the concept of masculinity is bound to go together with good, it is impossible to remain neutral about femininity.

Once we start considering warmth, action, light and truth as male traits, the female existence is bound in the categories of cold, passiveness, darkness and lie. The lack of equality in terms of gender in Christianity is not expressed solely by the dominant status of the male in the family and society; it also involves the demonization of women in general or at least the

rejection of certain feminine traits as signs of physical and moral weakness. In the first centuries to follow the foundation of Christianity, the negative opinions concerning the idea that equality between sexes was possible weren't as widely spread.

This early tolerance was partially due to the variety of Christian sects one could be a part of and the various gospels which later became apocryphal. At the time, the lack of a common institutionalized church and an official religious scripture allowed Jesus' followers to interpret his teachings in any way they deemed as appropriate, resulting in a more relaxed opinion concerning the accusation that women were temptresses by nature and their destructive passions had to be restrained. Nevertheless, with time, the structure of Christianity became more rigid.

After Christian worship was legalized in 313 as a decision of the Council of Milan, it also was made the official religion of the Eastern Roman Empire by Constantine, providing an ideal basis for the formation of a theocratic state. In political terms, this was very handy as the emperor was now regarded not just as a ruler of the people but also as a living manifestation of the justice of the Lord on Earth. However, in social terms, this was another strong factor to widen the gap between men and women by stressing on the importance of male sovereignty.

After the unavoidable collapse of the ancient empires, Europe was plunged into an era of war caused by the lack of centralized reign, unsteady economies and terrible plagues. All of these disasters naturally lead to the further hardening of religious dogma, as people thought that their faith in

God could provide them liberation from the misfortunes of the sinful material world by earning a place in Heaven. Medieval times are often referred to as the Dark Ages, and considering the way women were treated at the time, the name is fitting.

Theocracy was at its peak; never before had people been so dependent on religion in their everyday life. The topic of human sin was becoming painfully over-discussed as the common men had no scientific or economic knowledge whatsoever to be able to understand that the harsh times they were living in were not a punishment sent by God but an unfortunate combination of political and financial factors. Moral scrutiny was gradually becoming the norm and combined with the vilification of womanhood it lead to horrific outcomes.

One of the most influential philosophers of the time, Thomas Aquinas, openly states in his work *Summa Theologica* that " The female is a misbegotten male. " But nothing misbegotten or defective should have been in the first production of things. Therefore woman should not have been made at that first production". A couple of sentences later he adds that " occasions of sin should be cut off. But God foresaw that the woman would be an occasion of sin to man. Therefore He should not have made woman".

Strong religious belief combined with the conviction that women are less worthy of God's love slowly built up for the next two centuries resulting in an awful wave of misogynistic outbursts across Western Europe and Germany in particular. The *Malleus Maleficarum* (Witches Hammer) by Heinrich Kramer was a book which not only aimed to convince people that the threat of

witchcraft was more than mere superstition; it claimed that the root of moral decay was to be found in women.

Thousands of innocent women were prosecuted and killed for reasons that were justified by faith in God but in reality were fruits of naive superstition. Often times things as guiltless as having a mole or a birthmark were seen as a sufficient reason for thorough interrogation, and if the supposed witch was acting in an “unusual” manner, there was a possibility that she would have to pay for it with her life (Muchembled). Ideas common at the time were that the female body was fouler than that of man, and for that reason the demons preferred to mate with and possess women.

Interestingly enough, the notion that the female body, due to its outer tenderness and its mysterious inner workings capable of producing an offspring, is more likely to attract its owner to a life of moral debauchery and godlessness is a view common to all Abrahamic religions. Another link between them when it comes to the female anatomy is the fact that Christianity, Judaism and Islam alike share similar menstrual taboos according to which the menstruating woman has no right to partake in religious ceremonies and must shy from social contact (Young and Bacdayan).

The inability of men living in the past to understand the specifics of the female reproductive system lead not only to an obvious disgust and a conversational taboo; it had much to do with the principles of religion as well. Women, despite their physical frailty and moral inferiority, were able to

bear offspring; in the eyes of the believers, however, the miracle of birth was something sinful, a bad attempt to imitate the creative power of the Lord.

Though witch prosecutions died off with time, the subordinate status of women in society remained. The view that they were inferior to their husbands was rooted in the very foundations of society to such an extent that even later non-religious philosophers such as David Hume in the 18th century mechanically adopted it without even questioning its truthfulness. Aside from public prosecutions, there are other ways to express female subjugation, which may not be as brutal but are just as effective.

In her article *Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?* Sherry Ortner suggests that female suppression is expressed by any of the following:“(1) elements of cultural ideology and informants’ statements that explicitly devalue women...; (2) symbolic devices, such as the attribution of defilement, which may be interpreted as implicitly making a statement of inferior valuation; and (3) social-structural arrangements that exclude women from participation in or contact with some realm in which the highest powers of society are felt to reside”.

Though Christianity does not rely on the first two of these principles, the ban for female priests, the exclusion of menstruating women from certain rituals and the forbids of certain temples to allow women in all support the third claim. By limiting women’s access to sacred sites and rituals, men abuse the ideas of social equality Jesus spread among his followers. The altering of faith by addition of new rules is a sign of the deliberation of males to be in charge of religion, as of most other public spheres.

Despite the fact that women have been in a rather unfavorable position throughout the history of Christianity, that does not mean that there is no place for change and further development. If people stop striving to define the divine in material terms, they may be able to understand that the idea of God is supreme not because it favors one gender over the other and therefore bestows it with better qualities, but because God is beyond all which is human, including our understanding of gender, material existence and morality.

There is no such thing as superior virtue of the men since Christianity has a common set of moral norms for men and women alike, and its messages are not ones of intrapersonal competition and providing proof that one is better than the rest, but are concerned with the common well-being of all people regardless of their differences.

As idealistic as it sounds, there is an ongoing change in the way people see the teachings of Jesus. Perhaps it is a shift to the last of Kung's paradigms, the beginning of an age of enlightened Christianity which is beyond institution and dogmatic rules, or maybe human beings, after all the wars and bloodshed throughout history, are starting to realize that underlining our differences is not the proper way to go.

A couple of years ago, when asked by researchers Sally Gallagher and Christian Smith about his views concerning marriage, a young evangelist answered so: " Some believe women should be submissive. Well, in a sense, everybody has to be submissive. We are submissive, my wife is submissive to me, but...I have to be just as submissive to her.