

# Good feminism and religion: exploring the role of women in the world religions re...

[Religion](#), [Islam](#)



At the time when the modern world celebrates the establishment of equal rights for everybody in the laws, education, medical treatment, the religious demands are not equally preserved for all the members of society. The study of women in world religions offers a big pool of arguments and opinions arguing that the stronger sex takes over the religious lead. This essay is aimed to present the past and current religious trends concerning women. I will analyze what religion means to feminism and how it has affected the feminist thought. I will present my research of women's life in the three world religions pointing to major differences and similarities what it means to be a woman there. I will start this essay diving some definitions and short explanations of the key terms.

Religion plays some role in many people's lives and in women's lives it is often a suppressive force. In the variety of spiritual life the world religions are the most wide-spread religious cults. According to the census of the World Factbook published in 2012, 28% of the world population are Christians, 22% are Muslims, 15%- Hindus. Although there are people who practice different religions or are not religious at all, I will narrow my research to the first three and the role of women in Christianity, Islam and Hinduism as all of them are practiced in the United States today.

Talking about women's rights and feminism one needs at least a very general definition of this phenomenon. Feminism is the belief that men and women should have equal rights and opportunities. Feminism usually means the affirmation of the full humanity of women. Often feminists critique religions for marginalization of women. For instance women are bound by religious norms to wear some clothes, their private life depends on the

religious belonging, their education is often determined by religion and their role in the religious community itself is limited by a tradition.

At the same time feminism influences religions. According to a researcher of gender studies and Christianity Rosemary Radford Ruether, feminism began as a middle-class movement in Christian society in the 20th century. Shortly after first feminists' declarations and books on the topic some religious views were changes or discussed.

An important fact is that feminism takes different forms depending on cultural context and forms of society. In other words it has different meaning for African-American women than for middle class white women, different for Muslim women and Christian women. Therefore I will explore this difference which can be noticed in the religious aspect. I will divide the paper into three parts giving separate attention to the correlation of women's rights in different religions as Christianity, Islam and Hinduism.

If one asks a random Christian what is the attitude toward women in Christianity, he or she would rather say that woman is respected and honoured in the Bible. The most appreciated of them was Mary, who is called the Mother of Christ, the God's Son and people's " High Priest before his Father". The major branch of Christianity, the Catholic Church, teaches that " men and women are equal in the sight of God". Both of them are called " to build a family together through cooperation with each other and mutual respect". But where the Catholic view differs on men and women is in the giving of life. Women are supposed to give life by bearing children, while men give life through the priesthood. Therefore any other ways of giving birth are forbidden as well as any other forms of priesthood are prohibited.

Although there were cases of women serving as deacons, i. e. those who help a priest during the service, known in ancient and even modern times. Ruether points to the fact of ordained as deacons women in Orthodox Churches and Czech underground church. But Catholic Church remains a very conservative institution, denying any changes in the role of woman in society and church.

The Virgin Mary displayed the fullest extent of the maternal calling by becoming the Mother of Christ. Often she is devoted and very much honored in the Church as an example of virtuous and ideal woman. Although she stayed a virgin, miraculously she bore a child and had a husband. Also there are quite a few religious women who were proclaimed saints and are worshipped in religious services. Still, feminists claim that women do not have their rights defended in the Christian Church as they are not allowed to become priests (except the Anglican Church in the United Kingdom) and cannot fully control their bodies as abortions are censured by the Catholics. The situation with women in Islam is dictated by Quran, God's revelation, and Hadiths, an elaboration of the prophet Muhammad. The laws control many spheres of women's life such as education, dress-code, age of marriage, giving birth, divorce and even sex. Muslim women are forbidden to marry a non-Muslim. It is clear that Islam defines not only religious devotion of a woman but her whole life. A special case is polygyny which is allowed for men in some countries. But a curious note is that in Islam a woman can be an imam, i. e. a leader of communal prayer for a group of women. Another claim to prove the equality of men and women in Muslim society is a fact that a woman like a man is obliged with all three degrees of this religion: an

outward submission to Allah (Islam), an inward faith in Allah (Iman) and perfection of worship of Allah (Ahsan).

Shaikh Mubarak Ahmad, a researcher and a defender of Islam as an equal-rights religion, states that “ Islam has assigned a position of dignity and honour to woman” and claims that women have the same spiritual rights as men. But he adds that a woman is “ vulnerable and is in need of man’s strength for support and protection”. For this reason she may be “ forced against her will” while a man “ cannot be forced against his inclination”. These passages suggest that in Muslim society women are not expected to take a lead, they do not make decisions and need to listen their father or husband.

Jacob N. Kinnard presents the status of woman in Hinduism. He informs that in Hindu social and ethical texts women sometimes appear hierarchically inferior to men. For example the texts show that a girl is governed by her father, a married woman by her husband, a widow by her sons. He also adds that women are also depicted as impure because of menstruating.

Another note is that women can engage in sexual relationships only after their marriage. Engaging in sexuality before that is strictly forbidden. So, their private life is very much stands on their marriage without no choice. But a catching attention moment is that the Supreme power in Hinduism has no exact nature or gender.

One of the problems is that most of religions are based on ancient texts which often are very strict on women’s rights and role in society. Old restrictions seem to be kept as other rituals and traditions. One anonymous radical writer brings together lines taken from different religious texts to

prove how religions abuse women. Thus a phrase from Quran notes “ Men are above the women, because Allah has given the one part of superiority above the other”. A phrase from one of Hindu texts states that a woman should never enjoy independence”. Christian texts also include similar sayings. A letter of Paul to Ephesians contains this statement: “ The women shall be servants to their men who are their masters”. Surely, it is not completely correct to use a separate phrase from a text, but judging from these messages one may understand why feminist activists support women in Muslim societies and places where Hinduism is practiced and why they oppose a religious viewpoint on a woman in religious communities.

Gender relations still are contested in the religious organization. Most of religious systems do not allow female leadership. But at the same time in all three religions women tend to be more religious than men, informs Andreea Nica. She has studied the results of the Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion and Public Life where she found that women are more spiritual and religious than men. She comments on it with two possible explanations saying that the reason of this phenomenon could be such because women experience more social and economic disadvantages comparing to men. Also she adds that the world religions were created by men, therefore they are built up with a phallogocentric approach. The table below shows that women are more engaged in religious services and practice religion in their daily life.

Ruether is concerned about the rise of fundamentalism in Muslim and even Christian societies which has caused a regression of women's status.

Fundamentalists tend to return to fundamental principles of religion and

adhere to them fighting against secular changes in a society. She informs that many women are often rejected in their desire to get the same education in learning and teaching religious knowledge that is available to men. Also women are not ordained or given positions of leadership in most religions. Ruether declares that religious fundamentalism has resulted in a rejection of legal abortion partially birth control. She states that religious conservatives usually object to eliminate the discrimination against women basing themselves on contradictions of religious traditions. For instance, dowry deaths continue to be common in Hindu India, while “ honor killings” take the lives of many women in Islamic countries.

The researcher also summarizes recent events and dialogues for mutual understanding and improving of women’s position in world religions. A discussion at the 2009 Parliament of the World’s Religions shows that lay people want to transform patriarchal culture and adjust religious prescription in order to keep equal rights for both sexes. She encourages women and men of various religions to “ discover the riches that different traditions offer for transforming patriarchal cultures into emerging societies of human enhancement through gender difference and equivalence”.