

Stories of religious feminine figures

Sociology



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Girl power: Breaking gender stereotypes

Is the struggle of women versus men ever going to be resolved? Who knows? Men have overshadowed women's role in society. Women have been denied rights and opportunities in all fields, solely based on gender bias. Although it has been an unceasing dispute, a small number of females throughout the centuries have been able to surpass the obstacle of masculine predilection. Religion plays a significant role in this struggle because scholars have blamed it for women's oppression. Religious feminine figures such as Margery Kempe, Catherine Tekakwitha and Malala Yousafzai have been able to break the paradigm of religion's women oppression and have replace it with the idea that it is possible for devoted women to have a leading role in society by becoming a wife, mother, and literate, a Christian saint, an advocate for girls' rights and, therefore, an exemplary woman.

The role of women in societies has been heavily influenced by Christianity. Early Christian ideals were responsible for the "subordination of women to the adoption of household codes inspired by pagan Roman Models as well as by gradual changes in Church-state relations." During the first Christian century, the church exerted immense oppression in women. Women could not preach or teach. They were not allowed to write any text. Also due to the movement of exalted virginity, women were not able to marry. After the edict of toleration had been established in 313, with the movement of monasticism, women started to gain more rights slowly. But still not to a full extent, they were still seen as weaker and less rational than men. A fifteenth-century English visionary, Margery Kempe, had to live under these severe conditions.

In spite of the religious prohibitions for women at the time in Christianity, Margery Kempe was successful in overcoming these obstacles by proving that females were able to exercise different occupations simultaneously, including religious duties. Kempe bore fourteen children during her early life, and while being a mother she experienced Christ in “mystical encounters as the bridegroom whom she loved passionately and whose suffering she shared” and actively engaged in the Church. Margery harshly criticized the clergy and argued for an alternative Christian order where gender norms could not constrain women’s religious life. Although she was a mother of fourteen, Kempe made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem and later wrote a book that is regarded as the first autobiography in English and the second book written by a woman.

Julia Clarence-Smith could not describe in better words Margery as an exemplary woman. She said, “Kempe was different because of her status as wife, mother, and layperson.” This accurate description of Kempe proves that it is possible to be a woman in its entirety by participating at the same time in devout duties and defeating religious oppression. Margery, through her actions, achieved to elevate women’s status not only in Christianity but society as well and provided a path for women to follow.

Christianity’s primary goal during the seventeenth-century and the following centuries was of Christianizing individuals all around the world. The Church sent Jesuits and other groups to missions in different places, such as the Mohawk Nation (Present-day Canada). When Jesuits arrived at the Native-American territories, they found themselves in a spiritual culture, where Christianity did not play any role. The Jesuits, having their mission in mind, <https://assignbuster.com/stories-of-religious-feminine-figures/>

started to interact with the Iroquois and slowly introduced Christianity in their lives. Through hand signs, use of objects and sometimes translators they taught natives Christian values and drag them into converting. The main purpose of Jesuits was to convert natives to Christianity to save more souls. Slowly, Iroquois started to believe in Christian values and converted to Christianity. The most outstanding conversion and with a lasting impact was the one of Catherine Tekakwitha.

Native-Americans at the time were seen as savages, even if they were Christians. Therefore, they could never achieve a saint status. Catherine Tekakwitha, after her conversion, lived a thoroughly Christian life and even after her death was able to transcend that standard to become the first native saint woman. During her lifetime Catherine followed all Christian values and even decided to leave her hometown and move to Kahnawake so she could keep exercising her Christian faith. Devotion for Catherine meant everything. She never deviated from the Christian path. After Catherine had died, she started to perform miracles. Her piety when she was alive allowed her to continue the religious journey after death. People from all around the world prayed to her, went to visit her tomb, gathered ashes from her clothes. Even her teeth were used to cure people. Catherine helped women alleviate birth pains, bear children, and other illnesses such as eye inflammation. All these miracles forged her pathway to becoming a saint.

Catherine “ suddenly became known in the United States, and with her chariot hitched to the powerful engine of American nationalism, papal recognition began to seem a real possibility.” Catherine was beatified in 1980 but only until 2012 she became a saint. Catherine’s exemplary

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Christian life and her miracles after death fostered feelings among Americans and made them become her defenders. By creating such an effect in people, Catherine was able to eradicate the notion of natives being savages and not being able to be saints and became a feminine religious symbol for the Christian community.

Malala Yousafzai lived under conditions no one would ever desire. In 2007 the Taliban became part of her life in the Swat Valley, Pakistan. They arrived in groups, armed with knives and slowly started to acquire power by the use of brutal force, based on their religious extremist ideology. The Taliban took everything away from Malala and her whole town, their music, their Buddhas and their history. There was no hesitation in being extremely violent. The Taliban killed thousands of innocent people, raid villages, kidnapped women, exerted terrorism and banned fundamental human rights such as education for girls. In the Taliban's extremist religious ideology, a girl attending to school was completely against Islam. Through the destruction of schools and threats to the girls, the Taliban imposed their ideology throughout the Swat Valley.

Malala was always a bright girl. She started to forge her path as an exemplary woman when she decided it was time to stop the Taliban's ban on education. Even though girls' education was considered un-Islamic and Malala was living under that religious oppression, she firmly believed that Islam didn't establish that and that it was time to get rid of that oppression. Malala decided she would fight and stand for girls. She started to be an advocate for girl's rights when she first attended to shows, during interviews she stated, " they are abusing our religion, how will you accept Islam if I put <https://assignbuster.com/stories-of-religious-feminine-figures/>

a gun to your head and say Islam is the true religion?” Malala’s true voice was heard when she started to write an anonymous journal for BBC under the name Gul Makai. Pieces of her journals were being read all around the world, and a documentary about her started to be filmed. Malala’s name and her effort to defend girls’ rights became known all around the globe.

The Taliban closed all schools in the Swat Valley, but that didn’t stop young Malala. She moved away with her family and kept going to school. The turning point in Malala’s life, which forged her status as exemplary women, was when she was shot on her way to school. From that point on she became an example and the leading figure in the battle for education rights. Through her devotion not only in the righteousness of Islam but also in the right of education, and the defiance of the Taliban regime, Malala established herself as a role model for society. She won the Peace Nobel Prize for all her campaigns promoting girls’ education and proved that oppression based on extremist religious ideologies would never be enough to hold back a dream and its achievement.

History has been clearly changed and shaped by exemplary women. The historical and religious context of the time, their life experiences and their goals drove women such as Margery Kempe, Catherine Tekakwitha, and Malala Yousafzai to break the paradigm of religious women oppression. As each one of them came to have a leading role in society the notions of exceptionalism were transformed. From achieving to be able to do religious duties, to see natives as saints and to obtain basic rights for girls, the role of women in society today is completely different than before. Today women’s struggle is not based on freeing themselves from religious gender oppression

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but rather to be seen as empowered woman that can do whatever they imagine doing. There is always going to be something or someone keeping women from achieving the status they want in society, but women's campaign will never stop. Girl power is stronger than anything.