

Women and World Religions



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Contents



Preface xi

Acknowledgments xiii

Chapter 1

Introduction 1



Preliminary Considerations: Why Study Women and World Religion? 1

Similarities and Differences in Women's Experience 3

Outline of Chapter Organization 7

References and Materials for Further Study 13

Introduction



Preliminary Considerations: Why Study Women and World Religion?

The title *Women and World Religions* was deliberately chosen for the volume to emphasize that the primary focus is on “actual” women, as opposed to goddesses or other images and symbols of females and the feminine found in religious myths, art, and scriptures. Although the gender ideology and symbolism are relevant here to the extent that they help us understand how women have been viewed within and outside of their religious traditions as well as how they have viewed themselves, the main subject of this text is on actual women, not myths or symbols.

A preliminary question for consideration is, *Why focus on women and religion at all?* What makes it necessary, or even important or interesting, to look at women’s religious experience apart from that of men? One reason is that, like the rest of history and cultural development, women make up over half of the world’s population, and yet their *experiences and contributions have mostly been ignored, especially historically*. Religious traditions have almost all been **androcentric**, that is, established and developed by men from male perspectives and focused on the experiences of men.

Even more significantly, however, world religions are all **patriarchal** and **sexist** in origins, development, leadership, authority, and power. That a religion is “patriarchal” means literally that it is “ruled by the fathers.” The term is generally used today to refer to male domination, usually in a hierarchical

and gender-stratified manner, with men occupying the more significant and valued positions, and women the secondary, subordinate ones. That a religion is "sexist" means that it privileges men and male experience as superior and devalues or denigrates those of women as inferior. Because religious beliefs are generally highly valued within a culture, sexist religious beliefs that are presented as representing the "divine will" are used to legitimate patriarchy and sexism in society. As Susan Sered tells us, religion has a crucial role in presenting patriarchy as inevitable, inescapable, and ultimately correct (Sered 1999, 4).

In addition, the patriarchy and sexism of religious traditions has resulted in **gender differentiation** and **gender segregation**. Regarding the former, gender has often been used as a way of categorizing different aspects of experience in a dualistic manner, associating certain attributes or aspects as "female" and others as "male," with the former signifying what is inferior and the latter what is superior, such as earth/heaven, nature/culture, emotion/reason, weak/strong, yin/yang, dark/light, moon/sun, practical/theoretical, feeling/intellect. The result is often **gender ideology** which naturalizes ideas about how men and women both are and ought to be, ideas that develop out of cultures, but which are legitimated as part of divine law or God's will.

Gender segregation functions to separate and divide religious activities and experiences on the basis of gender, designating certain activities as appropriate or even mandated only for women, and others only for men. As we will see, gender segregation has operated to prohibit women from access to places of worship, from learning religious texts and practices, or taking leadership roles, and required them to perform certain additional tasks to purify themselves which men are not required to do. Gender segregation is often justified by taboos regarding menstruation and/or childbearing functions. Whether gender segregation is explained or justified in terms of the inferiority of women and superiority of men or as simply offering "complementarity of sex roles" of equivalent value and worth, it almost always functions to disadvantage women.

Gender segregation has resulted in women being excluded from the formulation of religious doctrine and practice, from participation in the central religious rituals of the tradition, and from spaces designated as sacred, especially during certain times such as menstruation or childbearing. They have often been excluded from opportunities for religious training and education, from the ability to become full-time religious specialists, such as nuns or priests, either formally or because of the inferior resources afforded to women for those roles, and from opportunities for leadership in their religious communities.

Because aspects of all world religions have been sexist and patriarchal and have used gender differentiation and segregation, the experiences of women in relation to religion have differed markedly from those of men. In

addition, because women's experience has so often been ignored or overlooked in religious traditions, it is either assumed to be the same as men's or at least as homogeneous with that of other women. Thus, another reason to focus on women and religion is to examine the differences among the statuses and experiences of women within the same religious tradition, as well as the differences between men's and women's status and experiences. The male bias of religious traditions sometimes means, though, that it is difficult to find sources that shed light on women's religious lives, especially historically.

Although all the major world religions traditionally have been androcentric, sexist, and patriarchal, women have nonetheless had a significant influence, both within their own gender-differentiated or -segregated "separate spheres," as well as on the larger tradition. Consequently, this textbook will explore how women from many parts of the world have thought about, acted, and been treated as members of a religious tradition and community. It will therefore address such questions as, How have women practiced religion? How have their beliefs differed from those of men, if at all? How have women within the major world religions negotiated their spiritual lives within traditions that are not only male dominated, but also sexist and patriarchal? Have they successfully carved out a "separate sphere" for their own spiritual activities, or are their religious lives in large part defined for them by male leaders?

Having established several important reasons for studying *women* and religion, it must also be noted that such a study is a hugely ambitious undertaking, even when we limit ourselves to "world religions," that is, those religions which are represented by peoples living in more than one geographical region or cultural area in the world. This is a slightly more expansive interpretation than the classic definition of "world religions" as comprised of only Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism. It also includes religions that have had an impact outside their place of origins, but not quite as extensive an influence as these world religions. Thus, in addition to the five main religions, this text also includes a number of Asian religions, including Taoism, Confucianism, and Shinto, African indigenous tribal religions, and Goddess religions from a number of different parts of the world. Covering such a vast amount of ground means that some generalizations will be made that do not apply universally, and that some exceptions to these generalizations will be overlooked.

Similarities and Differences in Women's Experience

There are a number of striking similarities and differences running through the descriptions of women's relationships to the religious traditions discussed in this volume.

Similarities

There are two striking similarities running through many religious traditions which present something of a paradox. On the one hand, women are almost always regarded as secondary or inferior to the men in the tradition, even where this is described in terms of them being "complementary" gender roles rather than those of superior and inferior. The dominant religious symbols are, more often than not, male gendered. The main textual sources and interpretations of those sources are almost exclusively written and controlled by men. Men predominate as the spiritual leaders, often occupying all significant leadership roles within the religion. This usually tends to be the case in religions which are more formally established and institutionalized than in less formally organized and structured ones, as we will see.

In short, the power and authority within religions is generally held predominantly, if not exclusively, by men. The exclusion of women from interpretation of sacred texts, the exclusive use of male-gendered language to refer to God or the divine, and the exclusion of women from full ordination as renunciants or formally recognized spiritual leaders, transcend a single world religion. In addition, although little research has yet been done on the topic, women-identified or lesbian women have been especially singled out for denigration by religious institutions, which have generally demanded female obedience and subordination to the authority of males, both sexually and otherwise.

On the other hand, women have found solace, inspiration, nurturance, sustenance, and spiritual growth and meaning within the confines of these sexist and patriarchal religious traditions. They have carved out spheres for their own practice, devotion, and even authority, within every religion described here. Whether formal or informal, women's religious roles frequently provide the fundamental support necessary for the maintenance and growth of the tradition. Women dominate many of the religious gatherings and worship services of many faith traditions and provide the ongoing labor, caring, and financial support necessary to maintain the religion.

In turn, religion has provided women with a space within which they have relatively more freedom and authority than is often available to them in many other spheres of social life. Devoting their lives to religious practice has often liberated women from a choiceless existence as wife and mother and provided them with the material support necessary to live relatively independent and autonomous lives. Ironically, the choices made available to women who commit themselves to foresaking "worldly" existence for a spiritual life often occur in the face of messages from those very religious traditions that tell women that they best fulfill their religious obligations and spiritual fulfillment through marriage and childbearing.

To some extent, this paradox is breaking down in the face of modernity. Increasingly, religious women are challenging the sexist and patri-

archal dimensions of their religions of origin. Some of these women are abandoning these religions for alternative religious traditions, "new" women-centered or women-friendly religions such as Wicca or Goddess spirituality, or altogether. Others are calling for reforms, ranging from modest to radical, in the way traditional religious traditions relate to women adherents. In almost every religion included in this volume, as we will see, there have been feminists advocating changes to improve the status of and roles for women in their religious institutions.

Differences

Not only does the experience of women within different religious traditions vary widely, but the experience of different women within the *same* religious tradition is often radically different, depending on a number of factors, especially cultural and regional differences, but also class status, age, childbearing (both capacity for and the actuality of), marital status, sexual orientation, geographical location (both First World versus Third World as well as rural versus urban), and political affiliation. These differences may result in women sharing a common religion having little in common with one another, for example, Egyptian and European Christian women.

Since religion is an aspect of culture, it is impossible to adequately study religion in the abstract, removed or out of context from a given cultural context. However, shared religious beliefs and practices may be more significant than cultural or regional differences. For example, it may make an Egyptian Christian woman's experiences more understandable to a European Christian woman than to an Egyptian Muslim woman. One important demarcation of regional and cultural differences is between the so-called Third World or developing countries and the First World or (post)industrialized countries. Because of disparities which result in people in the First World having relatively greater income, wealth, education, and general access to resources than people in the Third World, as well as the legacy of colonialism which subjugated the latter to the former, in general we will find that Third World women have had fewer opportunities to participate in, and thus to change, their religious traditions than First World women.

Also, in general, feminist initiatives to improve women's status in religion have begun in First World countries and later been implemented in Third World situations. For instance, many (especially Christian) citizens of Third World countries attend theological school in Western countries, thereby adopting different cultural traditions which they then bring back to their congregations. Despite these differences, international organizations in many religious traditions often facilitate interaction and understanding among women of diverse cultural and regional backgrounds who share a religious tradition. For example, women monastics in Christianity and Buddhism have international networks within which to share ideas and

experiences, and to facilitate travel to other cultures and thereby enhance women's knowledge of other forms of practice and opportunities for women in their larger religious tradition.

In addition to cultural and regional differences, class differences may play an important role in determining women's status and experience within a religious tradition. Just as elite women generally have had relatively more access to education and political power than poor women cross-culturally and throughout history, elite religious women have had greater opportunities for religious education, training, leadership, and participation in their traditions.

A further significant difference is how women have chosen to respond to the patriarchy, sexism, and gender segregation of their religious traditions. Even in contemporary times, when many women have had some degree of choice about their religious affiliations, especially in Western countries, many have chosen to remain faithful to patriarchal and sexist religious traditions. Although sometimes this adherence (or conversion) has been influenced by factors supplemental to religious faith alone, such as nationalist loyalty or political struggles for ending colonial domination or influence, it sometimes appears to be based on less tangible factors of faith and commitment to one's culture and traditions.

Similarities within Differences and Differences within Similarities

One of the fascinating aspects of studying women and world religions is that we discover differences within the similarities and similarities within the differences. As an example of the former, although most religions segregate women from men in certain aspects of practice and ritual, this segregation has very different impacts in different traditions. In many aboriginal and Native American religions, for example, gender segregation served to give both men and women vitally important roles to play in maintaining the religious life of the community. With the advent of colonialism, however, these roles often became the basis for hierarchy and sexist treatment of women.

In the postcolonial era, many women choose to support independence or nationalist movements spearheaded by men of their society and in the process reject "Western" notions of equality for women based on individual rights. For example, in Iran, many educated Islamic women voluntarily took back the wearing of the veil, a traditional Islamic practice for women, as a symbol of solidarity against Western imperialism. Wearing of the veil had been banned by the Western-supported reign of the Shah prior to the Islamic Revolution which installed the Ayatollah Khomeini as both spiritual and secular leader of Iran. The maintenance of religious tradition in this case, as in several others throughout the Middle East, Africa, and Asia, is often viewed as a bulwark against Westernization and the secularization of society.

As an example of the similarities among the differences in women's experiences, although symbols of women and the feminine have had a wide variety of different meanings and functions in different religious traditions, they have all functioned similarly to shape and define "ideal" roles and normative behavior for actual women.

Outline of Chapter Organization

Each chapter will focus on a specific religious tradition and will include the following dimensions:

- I. Overview of the Religious Tradition
- II. Relationship of Female-Gendered and Feminine Images and Symbols to "Real" Women
- III. Women's Relationship to the Religion
 - A. Women-Specific or Distinctive Aspects of the Tradition
 - B. Gender-Based Segregation and Inequalities
 - C. Women's Access to Religious Training and Education and Opportunities for Leadership Roles
 - D. Well-Known and/or Influential Women in the Tradition
- IV. Changes in the Status of Women, Both Historically and in Terms of Future Prospects
- V. Selection of Essays
- VI. Questions for Discussion
- VII. References and Materials for Further Study
 - A. Books and Articles
 - B. Internet and Media References

Further description of each of the sections follows.

Overview of the Religious Tradition

This section of each chapter will provide a very brief background of the major outlines of the religion, including some description of regional, cultural, and sectarian variations in the tradition. This background will provide a context for discussing women's status and experience within the religious tradition.