

## **How far do religious organisations and religious beliefs maintain those systems of inequality, which disadvantage women?**

Max Weber was one of the first sociologists to look at and address the issue of women's role in religion, and why religion might appeal to women more than men. However, it can be seen that in some ways, religious organisations and beliefs can maintain systems of inequality, which disadvantage women. To begin with, one must look at women's involvement in religion. In an article written by Weber, titled 'The Soteriology of the Underprivileged' he argued two main points. Firstly, that religious sects appeal to those who are underprivileged because they offer salvation from real suffering and; that women have a central role to play in such religious sects, in part because they are themselves underprivileged. Feminist theories of religion follow Marxist theories in arguing that religion can be an instrument of domination and oppression. However, unlike Marxism, feminist theorists tend to see religion as a product of patriarchy, rather than as a product of capitalism. They hold the opinion that religion serves the interests of men.

***"The Christian religion is a resolutely male affair in its symbolism as well as its hierarchy. While Mary, the mother of Jesus, may sometimes be treated as if she had divine qualities, God is the father, a male figure, and Jesus took the human shape of a man. Woman is portrayed as created from the rib taken from a man." (Giddens, 1997)***

Christianity has a history of being male-dominated. The Old Testament reflects the social realities of the time, and depicts a society, which was rigidly patriarchal. A woman was simply a man's private possession. The Ten Commandments even directly classes a man's wife as a possession:

***"Do not desire another man's house, do not desire his wife, his slaves, his cattle, his donkeys, or anything else that he owns." (Ex.20:17)***

The Old Testament also conveys the belief that rape or adultery were considered to be a violation of the husband's rights, whereas his own unfaithfulness was overlooked unless he interfered with the wife or daughter of another man. In Exodus 22:16 –17, it is told of how a man has to pay the 'bride price' of a virgin if he seduces her, as compensation to her father, as the unmarried woman was no longer considered to be of any real value if she was not a virgin. During much of their adult lives, women were considered 'unclean'. During menstruation, women were untouchable for at least a week. Also, after childbirth, a woman was considered unclean for forty days if she had a boy, and eighty days if she had a girl. (Lev. 12:2 -5) This traditional belief is still observed by Orthodox Jews, and 'The purification of women after childbirth' was a service still practised in the Church of England until the 1940's. These ongoing practices and beliefs maintain the systems of inequality, which disadvantage women.

200 years ago, women were leaders of a number of sects, asserting female equality within them. There were many successful female religious figures, for example Mother Ann Lee who led the Shakers to the New World where they

founded societies based on female equality and communal property. However, in present day, in the majority of churches, women have a relatively low status. In the Central London Church of Christ, women are not allowed to speak in its church and have no place in its hierarchy, and Mormon women are taught to believe that if their husband doesn't make it to Heaven, neither do they. It may therefore be quite surprising to note that though women continue to be excluded from key roles within many religions, women often participate more in organised religion than men. Steve Bruce points out that, according to the 1991 British Social Attitudes Survey, 65 percent of regular church attendees in Britain and Northern Ireland were women, compared to 35 per cent who were men.

Jean Holm looked at some of the ways in which women are subordinate or exploited in contemporary religions and have become devalued by different religious beliefs. Holm argues that, while the classical teachings of many religions have stressed equality between men and women, in practice, women have usually been far from equal.

***“Women do, of course, have a part to play in many religions, but it is almost always subordinate to the role of the men.” (Holm, 1994)***

The French feminist Simone de Beauvoir shared Holm's view and went on to compare the way religion acts for women to the way in which religion could act for the oppressed classes. She believed that religion can be used by the oppressors (men) to control the oppressed group (women) and it serves as a way of compensating women for their second class status. Like Marx's proletariat, religion gives women the false belief that they will be compensated for their sufferings on earth by equality in heaven. In this way, the subjugation of women through religion helps to maintain the status quo in which women are unequal.

Whereas Simone de Beauvoir writes from the perspective of a Western, Christian woman, Nawal El Saadawi is an Egyptian feminist writer and a leading advocate of women's rights in the Arab world. Though El Saadawi agrees that women are oppressed in society, she denies that the oppression of women is directly caused by religion in general, or Islam in particular. El Saadawi illustrates this belief with the example that female circumcision has been practised in a considerable number of countries, not all of them Islamic. To El Saadawi, the oppression of women is caused by “the patriarchal system which came into being when society had reached a certain stage of development.” Nevertheless, she does see religion as playing a role in women's oppression, as men do distort religion to serve their own interests, to help justify or legitimate the oppression of women.

It can be seen that modern-day worshippers, use Biblical texts to oppress women and ensure that they remain in a disadvantaged position. Though the scriptures were written hundreds of years ago, when society was very different, the laws are still observed by some Orthodox and extremist groups. In the Qu'ran, the prescribed penalty for adultery is one hundred lashes and a year in exile (Sura 24:1). However, Mohammed did condemn people to be stoned to death. Today many Islamic fundamentalists advocate the stoning of women and stoning does occur in many Muslim countries. Honour-killings also occur when men feel that female family members have brought shame to

the family. This occurs among Muslims and also Arab Christians, who claim that it is their tradition. Tradition has always been religion's ally in the subjugation of women. Tradition and religion can be seen as the iron ball and chain that hinders women's progress.

Some Muslim scholars believe that Mohammed did proclaim some rights for Muslim women. For example, he abolished the pre-Islamic Arabian custom of burying - alive unwanted female infants. He also decreed that women could own and inherit property and that women have the right to enjoy making love. However, he did enshrine women's inequality and inferior status in immutable Quranic law, accepted by Muslims as the infallible word of God.

***“Men have authority over women because God has made the one superior to the other, and because men spend their wealth to maintain them. Good women are obedient. They guard their unseen parts because God has guarded them. As for those among you who fear disobedience, admonish them and send them to beds apart and beat them.” Sura 4:34***

Under Shari'a, Islamic Law, a man can marry up to four wives. He can divorce his wife or wives by saying 'I divorce you' three times. For a wife to obtain a divorce is usually very difficult. Muslim apologists claim that Muslim women have the right to divorce and that in Islam the mother is revered and respected. However, upon divorce, fathers win custody of boys over the age of six and girls on the onset of puberty. Many women would be reluctant to divorce violent and polygynous husbands for fear of losing their children. Children are considered the property of the father with the mother being merely the 'caretaker.' One must question how it is possible for a Muslim man to respect his mother when immutable religious law proclaims women's inferiority and inadequacy. This traditional religious belief and practice maintains the disadvantaged position of Muslim women. Also, it is the view of some that Islam's psychotic obsession with female chastity, modesty and virginity has rendered men incapable of viewing women as equal and worthy companions. How can Muslim men be expected to treat women equally and decently when their religion and culture essentially forbids it?

The Taliban, a product of the Madrasah, took the subjugation of women to new heights. Women were barred from employment and girls were forbidden to attend school. Women were also denied medical care because it was illegal for women to be examined by a male doctor. Any woman caught in the company of a male not related to her was sentenced to death and women were not permitted to leave the house without being accompanied by a male relative. Their strict, rigid religious beliefs and practices strongly maintain the systems of inequality, as women are severely disadvantaged, with all of their basic human rights taken from them.

However, when confronted with the issue of women's plight in Muslim countries, Muslim apologists insist that their religion has been misunderstood and that Islam actually grants women certain rights. They blame tradition and tribal societies for low status and oppression of women. However, one must question; since Islam has complete control over every aspect of Muslim society, how can it not be to blame for the systems of inequality, which disadvantage women? A good example to illustrate this is that of the women

in Turkey. Turkey's women are the most liberated in the Muslim world. This was achieved not through Islamic reformation, but through secularisation established by the founder of the modern Turkish republic, Kernal Ataturk. Kernal was the product of secular education and had always admired Western culture. He pursued a program of westernisation that affected all aspects of Turkish life – women were granted the vote and veiling was prohibited. If the Turkish system were to collapse and be replaced by an Islamic theocracy, it can be predicted that this progress would be reversed and women would once again be the subjects of oppression.

There are also other studies which suggest that religion does not oppress women. Leila Badawi (1994) notes aspects of Islam that are positive for women. Unlike Christian women, Islamic women keep their own family name when they get married. Rita Gross (1994) detects that there are signs that a 'post-patriarchal' Buddhism might be developing in Western countries. Alaxandra Wright notes that Reform Judaism has allowed women to become rabbis since 1972. Holm points out that there are some Christians, Quakerism for example, which have never been oppressive to women.

Therefore, it should not be assumed that all religions are, and always have been, equally oppressive to women. Furthermore, even apparently oppressive practices may be open to varied interpretations. One example is the veiling of women. Some Islamic laws are renounced worldwide as being oppressive to women. The popular image of Islam is of a fundamentalist religion, which, amongst other things, oppresses women. However, as Watson discovered, many Muslim women found advantages in different Islamic laws, for example, wearing a veil. These women believed that the veil makes a statement about their moral values and is a sign of religious faith, not oppression.

In Muslim societies, religion governs all aspects of life and has priority over secular laws and local customs. Therefore, the religious beliefs and practices in this culture strongly maintain the systems of inequality that disadvantage women. Any attempts by various governments to give women more freedom, greater property and marriage rights have been vehemently opposed by conservative Islamists, who insist that the reforms are against Islam. Even the situation here in the UK can illustrate the belief that religious beliefs and practices maintain the systems of inequality, which disadvantage women. In the past, here in Britain, women have also been the subjects of oppression, though at a much smaller degree than in some Muslim countries. Women did not have the right to vote, women did not work and women could not be ordained as Priests. However, as time has gone on, secularisation has taken place. As religion became 'less important' and had less of an influence over people's decisions, women became much more equal partners in society. As time has changed, women have even been ordained as Priests in the Church of England.

Overall, it can be seen clearly that religion does play an important role in maintaining the systems of inequality that disadvantage women. Religious 'traditions' and scriptures are often used by members to cater to their own needs and to oppress women. However, it is not only religion that does this. Political parties and governments would essentially be able to hold ample control over people and promote systems of inequality. So, therefore, though religion does play an important role, it is not the only organisation that disadvantages women.