

SOCIOLOGY : RELIGION AND WOMEN

Religion can be seen to act as a social control over women to a large extent. The feminist perspective argues religion serves the interests of men and cements patriarchal power. Karen Armstrong points out the ways in which God has been redefined by each era, by men to continually meet their needs. We can see this in relation to two main ideas, the nature of religious imagery. In most religions, women tend to be portrayed in terms of their "traditional" social characteristics. The "Virgin Mary" in Christian religion for example. Although a powerful figure her power, is ideological rather than political - the virtues of purity, chastity, motherhood and so forth are personified through her as ideals for womanhood. Giddens states, "Females appear as important figures in the teachings of some Buddhist orders...but on the whole Buddhism, like Christianity, is an overwhelmingly male-created institution dominated by a patriarchal power structure in which the feminine is most closely associated with the secular, powerless, profane and imperfect." Beauvoir says religion is used to deceive women into thinking they are equal and taught to be passive. They are told they are close to God as they produce a soul of god when they are mothers but this is used to control them and they in turn socialize the children into the religion and the ideology, ultimately not recognising their inequality and it all benefits men. The nature of religious organisation is another issue when stating the extent to which religion is used as a social control over women. While women, feature strongly in both religious participation and to a certain extent, imagery, it is evident that there has been a very noticeable inequality between males and females in terms of positions of power and authority within religious organisations. Although some sects have allowed women to preach and spread the word, the majority of the world's major religions have tended to relegate women to relatively subordinate roles, in terms of their power, authority and influence in their organisation (which further reflects women's experience in the social world).

However the extent to which religion has been used as a social control over women can be questioned as in relation to Christianity, the decision in 1994 by the Church of England to ordain women as priests and to allow them to take charge of Church services is a significant development to note. Also some religions do not convey the same ideology as others and are more egalitarian such as some new forms of Buddhism. Badawi notes that aspects of Islam are positive for women such as keeping their family name and it is open to interpretation whether some aspects of religion are oppressive to women or not, the issue of veiling is an example. Watson argues from a 'Western' view the veiling of women is seen as constraining and restrictive and a form of social control (sanctioning women's invisibility and subordinate status). But from a Muslim view it can be liberating for women as in an increasingly globalised world where western culture is influencing them the veil can take on new meanings for women.

As to what extent religion acts as a social control over women, it is difficult to specify. As it cannot be assumed that all religions have been equally oppressive to women. In addition even some apparently oppressive practices may be open to interpretations. Also some theorists argue religion itself is not oppressive but due to the patriarchal system, so in these terms religion can be seen to be exploited by the dominant males to benefit and

protect their interests and so religion has been used as a social control over women to a greater extent than women themselves may have thought.