

CURRENT SITUATIONS IN THE CHRISTIAN CONTEXT FROM THE ASPECT OF THE GENDER PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract: *This study aims to analyze three key dimensions: the historical-cultural approach, theological interpretations, sociological analyses, and narratives, with a particular emphasis on the Old Testament and gender asymmetry in the creation myth, as well as the Apostle Paul's teachings on women. The historical-cultural approach seeks to investigate the historical foundations of gender roles within Christianity and the various interpretations that have shaped societal attitudes and norms concerning gender. Additionally, this research will examine the manifestations of gender within Christian communities, particularly the status of women in the Christian tradition and the role of Christianity in shaping and reinforcing gender stereotypes. This involves an exploration of gender dynamics across different Christian denominations, highlighting both progressive and conservative perspectives. Furthermore, this study will address women's activism and the role of feminist theology, commonly referred to as Christian feminism, within Christian communities. It will examine contemporary challenges faced by women in their efforts to resist patriarchal traditions and explore potential avenues for transforming patriarchal structures within religious institutions. Ultimately, this research aims to assess the broader impact of the Christian tradition on modern society and its influence on religious and cultural frameworks from a gendered perspective*

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1. Introductory Considerations

The closest form to mythology is religion. There is hardly a person who does not recognize the term “religion,” regardless of whether they are religious or not or whether they can define it or not. Recognizing the term implies that it refers to a phenomenon associated with a distinct human experience that cannot be reduced to any other. What kind of questions form the fabric of religion? Suppose myth represents an attempt by the collective consciousness of our distant ancestors to explain the world they lived in. In that case, religion seeks to address the dichotomy between transience and permanence: Where does all of this lead, and what is the ultimate fate of humanity? Religion has its roots in our need for continuity, for overcoming death. It is tied to the hope that our earthly end is not final. At its core, religion primarily revolves around a transcendent consciousness (Savić, 1999).

Throughout the long history of humankind, there have been many attempts to define religion. It is a subject of study in various disciplines, including philosophy, sociology, anthropology, history, and psychology. Given that religion is one of the most complex phenomena of human existence, any scientific effort to explain and understand its essence requires an interdisciplinary approach in methodological terms.

To arrive at a comprehensive definition of religion—one that encompasses all religious experiences of humanity in both a diachronic and synchronic sequence—we refer to the notion that religion can be understood as any belief in an absolute and mystical power upon which human beings depend. This power controls both life and death, yet it can be influenced through specific behaviors. Individuals may express their experiences with this power in cognitive, emotional, practical, and mystical ways, taking the form of teachings, rituals, communities, or charismatic figures. The knowledge and expression of experiences with this power hold particular significance for individuals and a certain importance for the community, as life—both individual and communal—would appear entirely different without them (*ibid.*).

The portrayal of the Bible is not without methodological difficulties, as the most significant religious text in Western culture must be analyzed from anthropological and cultural perspectives. While the Bible has a unique history of survival, it also contains controversial content and has played complex roles throughout history. In any case, encountering this text does not leave one indifferent.

At the same time, it is fascinating to consider how many hands have held it, how many souls it has influenced, and how it has contributed to spiritual growth and elevation. Biblical teachings have been preached in sacred temples, shared within families, and have inspired artistic and literary creations through their stories and legends. Their centuries-long presence serves as a remarkable bridge connecting us to tradition, to the experiences of distant times, and to their role in shaping the shared cultural identity of much of humanity. In this sense, the Bible is a book from which much can be learned, but it also invites critical examination, particularly from the perspective of feminist discourse (*ibid.*).

Addressing the question of women within the feminist discourse essentially means presenting the challenges, concerns, and achievements of women's studies in religion—an orientation in modern theory and theology that emerged in the final decades of the twentieth century. Such an endeavor requires several methodological clarifications from the outset.

First, this is not a distinct academic discipline but rather a series of specialized studies within theology and various scientific fields and disciplines that approach the subject of women and religion from a feminist perspective. Second, considering the fact that the term “feminism” is not unambiguous but is used as a generic term for a complex phenomenon that is most often defined by the debates that have arisen regarding its meaning, the feminist perspective, in fact, refers to the methodological recommendations that emerged from the tradition of “consciousness-raising” within the feminist movement. (Марковска, 2000).

2. The Historical-Cultural Approach to Gender Roles in Christianity

The discussion of women and religion from a feminist perspective is significant not only for determining the role of world religions in shaping the traditional image and role of women but also for its fundamental importance, as religion affects the deepest aspects of human existence, both individually and collectively. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, taking women's proactiveness as a key interpretative category, explores the extent to which women, just like men, were initiators of the Christian movement and demonstrates that early Christian history is also women's history (cited in Марковска, 2000: 23). This perspective fundamentally reshapes the understanding of Christianity's origins. Although the place of the early Christian movement in the biblical canon presents it as a doctrine of equality, the historical reality led to the egalitarian ethos of early Christianity being forced to yield to the process of patriarchalization (ibid.).

2.1. Gender Asymmetry in the Bible and the Myth of Creation

The Bible presents two different accounts (interpretations) of human creation, which fundamentally differ in terms of the status of men and women. In the first version (Genesis 1:26-27), God creates man and woman simultaneously, in His own image: *"So God created man in His own image; male and female."* This account seemingly implies gender neutrality — man and woman are created at the same time and together receive God's command to rule over nature. However, the second version (Genesis 2:18-22) introduces asymmetry. In this account, Adam is created first, and Eve is formed from his rib as his "helper": *"It is not good for man to be alone; I will make a helper suitable for him!"* This exact distinction in the creation myth serves as the foundation for the later subordinate role of women in Jewish and Christian traditions.

Another key aspect of gender asymmetry is Eve's role in the narrative of sin and punishment. According to the Bible, Eve was deceived by the serpent and was the first to break God's law, subsequently leading Adam to sin: *"I will make your pains in childbearing very severe; with painful labor you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you."* (Genesis 3:16). This narrative establishes the concept of woman's subordination to man as a punishment for her disobedience. Later, Christian theology would contrast the Virgin Mary with Eve—Mary symbolizing purity and obedience, serving as a figure meant to "redeem" the sin of the first woman, Eve.

Phyllis Trible, in her work *"God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality"*, demonstrates that the creation myth in the Bible has traditionally been interpreted as a means of justifying the fundamental assumption of the inequality between man and woman in the act of God's creation. The persistence of this assumption in all areas of religious thought, institutional religious life, and practice has been justified by the authority of the Holy Scripture (Trible, 1978).

Elizabeth Cady-Stanton, addressing the unequal status of women in religion, points out that the Bible defines woman as a secondary form of human being and that religious authorities have used it to hinder women's social emancipation. Cady-Stanton published female commentaries on the position of women in *The Bible*, calling it *The Women's Bible*. In this work, which is a representation of an intellectual and rationalist critique, the aim is to revise only those texts and chapters that pertain to women, as well as those in which women are prominent, albeit exceptionally. The critique of religious premises in this work undergoes a deep elaboration, acknowledging that the perception of gender asymmetry in society is a product of the premises of world religions.

Feminists argue that as a consequence, our knowledge of human religious experience is distorted and partial. Much of what has been claimed as objective knowledge of human experience is, in fact, knowledge that reflects male experience from a male perspective. For most feminist researchers, the

root of the problem lies in the identification of the male with the human in religions. This identification has, for centuries, been a fundamental and unquestioned assumption embedded in the notion that the male form is the primary form of human experience, the measure of human existence and identity (Cady-Stanton, 1898).

2.2. The Role of Religion in Shaping and Maintaining Gender Stereotypes

According to Mary Daly, the assumption of identifying human experience with the male one shaped both the Jewish and Christian traditions. Her critique addresses the significant role that religions play in legitimizing and reinforcing such an assumption within society and culture. Based on the view that the understanding of human nature implicitly or explicitly shapes religious ideas and practices, the further goal of feminists was to critique the anthropological assumptions embodied in religious traditions. According to them, the assumption that the male is normative in religion functioned in such a way as to keep the human and the female in opposition. This opposition stems from the persistent asymmetry in the foundational premises of gender in religion (Daly, 1973).

Rosmarie Redford Ruether was one of the first to highlight the importance of gender asymmetry in Western culture and the need for radical critique that would challenge traditional concepts of masculinity and femininity as constructs of patriarchal culture. As a consequence of the assumption that the male is the primary form of human being, the assumption follows that the female is a secondary form and, therefore, an incomplete, unfinished form of human being² (Radford Ruether, 1983). Referring back to Mary Daly, as well as other feminists, they argued that when divinity is conceived exclusively as male, women are denied full dignity and the possibility of being human, meaning that what sacred symbols represent for men should also represent for women. They are spiritually trapped in a situation where their potential to be fully human and authoritative in private and public life is blocked. In their own self-representation and in society, women are perceived as “the second sex.” These asymmetric gender assumptions embodied in religious traditions functioned to diminish the female experience, prevent the understanding of this experience as a unique human experience, and hinder a view of the place of male-centeredness and sexism in such major religions as Judaism and Christianity (Daly, 1973).

3. Female Activism and Feminist Theology in Christianity

Women’s studies in religion³ have particularly focused on the powerful connection between religious understandings of reality and social institutions. Specifically, they emphasize the link between the portrayal of women and their status in theology and the cultural patterns that define women’s

² **See:** The First Book of Moses (Genesis) 2, where the man in the garden, God’s command, and the creation of woman are described, as well as the foundations of marriage.

³ **Clarification:** Within feminist theory, a specific theoretical direction has developed, known as Christian feminism. This theoretical direction aims to develop feminist consciousness within theology in order to promote and understand equality between men and women morally, socially, and spiritually from a Christian perspective. Christian feminists argue that contributions from women are essential for a full understanding of Christianity. Christian feminists believe that God does not discriminate based on biologically determined characteristics such as gender and gender manifestations. The issues they address include the ordination of women, male dominance in Christian marriage, and recognition of equal spiritual and moral capabilities, reproductive rights, and the search for the feminine divine. Christian feminists often consider the teachings of other religions and ideologies as well as biblical evidence. At the same time, as a specific term to describe their commitment in practice, the term Christian egalitarianism is used, which encompasses those who advocate for gender equality and fairness among Christians but do not wish to be associated with the feminist movement (Savić, 1999).

social roles and status. However, feminists did not view the subordination of women as merely an issue of women's status in religion and society. Their focus is on exploring the broader and deeper implications that religious and social oppression of women has for modern humanity. In efforts to reconstruct ethical thought, feminist theologians place emphasis on public or social spheres, particularly on programs for transformation not only of the position of women but also of the human condition in general. Here, the relationship between religious ideas and social structures is revealed, with special insistence on the connection between theory and practice. Furthermore, in reconstructing Christian ethical teachings, feminists focus on the issue of injustice and the criteria for liberation (Марковска, 2000).

The roots of oppression are an important component for analysis, not because they help us understand the past, but because they continue to live on in our current social relations. It proves that the failure of the contemporary Christian community to act in an egalitarian manner calls into question the historical moral commitments of the tradition. It advocates for the reconceptualization of traditional moral categories (*ibid.*).

Feminist theologians show that religion, in addition to helping define sexist feminist patterns, has also contributed to the subjugation of women by officially excluding them from the main activities in the creation of culture, i.e., from the creation of the framework of meanings and beliefs. Religion has denied women human activity and personal and social power in discovering their own interpretation of ultimate reality and truth. What differentiates feminist theologians from scholars in the social and humanistic sciences is their view that the key for women to become the force in their own lives, in society, and in culture lies in the act of creating and articulating their religious meaning, in formulating their theological problems, and in their religious vision. This stance imposes the task of reconstructing religious belief, or transforming sacred symbolism in culture, this time based on a distinct female experience. Feminists agree that Christianity and other dominant world religious traditions are sexist, but they disagree on whether religions can be transformed or if they are structurally and "permanently" patriarchal. Those feminist theologians who believe that established religions can and should be reformed argue that unless traditional representations of women are reformed, they will remain constant obstacles to the achievement of full dignity and the active participation of women in society (Savić, 1999).

At the same time, feminist theologians (within Christian religion) see important sources of liberating motives for interpreting and shaping the female contemporary experience⁴. In other words, they view women as theological subjects and point out the theological priority of reinterpreting female beliefs in light of their own experience. For feminist theologians, the goal of their research is to reinterpret Christian doctrine and tradition in order to free them from the historically distorted image that provides the ideological foundation for patriarchal domination (*ibid.*).

Rosemary Radford Ruether was the first to attempt to build a systematic non-sexist theology based on the implications of feminist critique for the reinterpretation of Christian doctrines. She introduces the vision of a theology that begins with female experience and represents a radical critique of the idea of hierarchy, of the fundamental structural dualism of privilege/no privilege that permeates all social patterns of oppression, such as racism, anti-Semitism, poverty... Many feminists share her vision of this theology (Radford Ruether, 1983).

However, in their research, many feminists come to the conclusion that traditions such as Judaism and Christianity cannot serve as the foundation for the complete human fulfillment of both men and women. Daphne Hampson, who played a leading role in the campaign in England during the 1970s aimed at allowing women to perform religious services in the Anglican Church, is now referred to as a post-Christian. She believes that Christianity and feminism are incompatible and calls for a new

⁴ See: The Biblical tradition of Mary Magdalene, (Luke 8:1–3; Mark 15:40; John 20:11–18).

conceptualization of God. Other feminists seek sources for a distinct female religious vision, but they do not look to the past, firmly believing that authentic female spirituality cannot be rediscovered in the history of patriarchal religious and cultural traditions that reject and distort it. They oppose feminist theologians who believe that women have such a past or religious history from which modern female spirituality can draw. According to them, deeply ingrained sexist attitudes are the foundation of the patriarchal Christian tradition, and it cannot be eradicated in any way (Hampson, 1990).

We will return to Mary Daly, who argues that patriarchy itself is the dominant religion in the world and demonstrates that only from the “other side” of male-dominant religion and culture can women discover the power to become authentic female figures. Similarly, in line with Mary Daly’s views, other feminists state that the primary task of feminist religious thought is defined as the creation of a new moral vision, religious imagery, and rituals grounded in the experience of the modern woman (Daly, 1973).

3.1. Contemporary Challenges and Prospects for Change: Perspectives of Feminist Theology in a Christian Context

The twentieth century undoubtedly brought significant changes in women’s position, status, and role within and beyond organized religion. Many of these changes can be attributed to the dominance of secular ideologies, which often challenge traditional religious norms and values, as well as political and social revolutions that frequently emerge as their by-products. In both Christian and Jewish traditions, the growing influence of feminist criticism has been a notable development. While some feminists distance themselves from traditional religions more and more, viewing them as predominantly male-dominated, others work within these traditions to challenge subordinate representations and institutional restrictions. One of the outcomes of this struggle is the gradual opening of opportunities for women in roles that were previously inaccessible to them. For instance, Reform Judaism now ordains female rabbis, women in Anglican churches have gained the right to be ordained into priestly roles, and in Protestantism, women are increasingly entering various forms of ministry (Savić, 1999).

Feminists in Christian religious thought often refer to the words of Apostle Paul: “In Christ,” he says, “there is neither male nor female” (Galatians 3:28). However, at the same time, gender discrimination deepened within the Christian Church, particularly when the same apostle instructed women to cover their hair and remain silent in church. Much of the traditional Christian stance on women can be attributed to dualism, inherited from Greek philosophy, which shaped Christian thought from its earliest centuries. Spirit and matter, soul and body, are seen as separate and in conflict. A woman is “carnal” (associated with the body), therefore, she should be considered subordinate, much like all physical things. This dualistic thinking led to the significant devaluation of married women in Roman Catholic Christianity—those who actively participated in bodily life—as opposed to virgins, who renounced their bodies in pursuit of spiritual growth. Christian customs retained taboos related to menstruation and childbirth, partly inherited from Jewish traditions. These taboos played a role in the Catholic Church’s persistent refusal to ordain female priests. Nevertheless, non-priestly female religious orders have existed since early Christianity, offering various roles in contemplative solitude⁵. Within the limited “roles” assigned to them, women made significant contributions to Christianity. They played crucial roles in the early Church and have remained important as laypersons to this day. Christian women became martyrs, later revered as saints and mystics. At certain points in history, female religious orders had twice as many members as male orders (ibid.).

⁵ See: Nuns*, Franciscans*, Carmelites*.

Concluding Observations

Based on the discussion in this study, particularly the focus on the historical roots and cultural interpretations of gender roles in Christianity—contextualized through biblical interpretations, sociological analyses, and theological discourses—religion has played a fundamental role in shaping societal norms and perceptions of masculinity and femininity. The analysis of biblical narratives, especially the creation myth (as seen in the Book of Genesis), reveals two different interpretations of the relationship between men and women. While the first version suggests gender equality, the second introduces asymmetry, which was later instrumentalized in the patriarchalization of Christian communities.

On the other hand, early Christianity exhibited tendencies toward egalitarian values, but under the influence of cultural and social conditions, these values were marginalized in favor of patriarchal structures. Women, who were active in the first Christian communities, were gradually excluded from positions of power and relegated to subordinate roles. The Christian tradition not only institutionalized these gender inequalities but also actively maintained them through theological interpretations that justified male dominance and female submission. This is particularly evident in the teachings of the Apostle Paul, who, through various epistles, established the concept of women being subordinate to men, which later became the foundation for the formation of social gender stereotypes.

Furthermore, Christian religious institutions have shaped the status of women in society in multiple ways. On one hand, religion has functioned as a mechanism for socializing gender roles, maintaining traditional perceptions of male and female nature. On the other hand, certain progressive theological movements, such as Christian feminism, have sought to revise this deeply rooted structure. Feminist theological interpretations have emphasized the need for new readings of sacred texts that reject the patriarchal narrative and recognize women's experiences as equal within the Christian tradition.

Ultimately, the contemporary challenges faced by women in Christian communities persist despite efforts within some denominations to create a more inclusive role for women. From a general point of view, religious institutions still present a significant barrier to the concept of gender equality. Debates surrounding the ordination of women for priestly functions and their participation in church hierarchy reflect the ongoing struggle between tradition and modern values.

In conclusion, this study highlights that religion remains one of the most powerful sociocultural factors influencing gender relations. Through its myths, doctrines, and institutions, Christian tradition has shaped perceptions of women's roles in society and continues to be a field of controversy and transformation. While there is a tendency to uphold traditional values, new interpretations challenge patriarchal dominance and advocate for greater gender equality. Feminist theological approaches and critical analyses offer opportunities to reassess religious texts and their significance in a modern context. This reassessment is a necessary step toward fostering a more dynamic and inclusive understanding of faith and gender relations.

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