

The Impacts of the Genderization of Ultimate Religious Authority

By Jim Boyer

One issue faced by all religious institutions is the role of gender in worship, teachings, leadership, and daily rituals. Historically, male dominated power structures have played a part in severely limiting the role of women in a religious setting. However, the genderization of religious authority has also played a major role. By fully analyzing the impact of associating deities with a specific gender we can at least partially explain the exclusion of women and the limitations of gender roles within a religious context.

A major cornerstone of many religions is one or more supreme deities, which the members usually identify as the highest authority and ultimate source of inspiration. When that deity is associated with specific traits of a certain gender, the religious foundation and worship is inherently biased to favor one gender. For example, in the Jewish tradition as Howard Eilburg-Schwartz writes, “God is generally a ‘He’ who is described in predominantly masculine images: Father, Husband and King to name a few,” (Eilburg-Schwartz 1). Notice that the Jewish God is not a Queen, Mother or Wife, which indirectly suggests that it is more ideal to be the masculine version of each title.

This unspoken bias for the perceived characteristics of one gender fosters an environment susceptible to gender-based exclusion and the development of unjust gender roles. The favored gender then gains an edge in power attainment, eventually leading to oppression based on roles defined and assigned because of the genderization of the highest religious authority.

In the example of the Jewish tradition, Women are at a clear disadvantage as “the masculinity of God both reflects and reinforces male domination in the religious domain, if not the social order,” (Eilburg-Schwartz 1). By defining the ultimate authority of a religion as having characteristics associated with only a single gender, a struggle is created in which one gender’s traits are ignored while the other gender idealized and in turn given control of power.

Women are not just excluded, however. They are also assigned roles that are submissive to men. Roman Catholicism, which also worships a masculine god, demonstrates the impact of a gendered Supreme Being through the religion’s reasoning for the exclusively male authority. Rita Gross explains:

“Gender identity, I would claim, is more basic for most people than identification in terms of color, shape, or even culture, and is far more addictive. In this regard I have always been struck by an argument used by some Roman Catholics against the ordination of women to the priesthood.

The priest must mirror Jesus, it is claimed, and that means the priest must have a male body” (Gross 4).

Women are denied the chance at leadership in the church, as well as most any form of power, because the deity of the religion was a different gender, making any feminine attempt to become completely ‘like Christ’ inherently futile. Only a person born of the same gender as their deity Jesus has the potential to truly duplicate the deity’s qualities. If the Roman Catholic argument is taken to heart, it can be all but assumed that if Jesus, or any ultimate authority for that matter, was not genderized then all would share the control of power equally.

Islam has taken steps in this direction. According to Dr. Amina Wadud, “It seems that the Qu’ran aimed to erase all notions of women as subhuman. It is empathetic that since Allah is not created then he/she/it can not be subject to or limited by created characteristics, like gender” (Wadud 1-2). The Qu’ran attempts to achieve neutrality by establishing how the deity’s overwhelming supreme nature inherently eliminates the possibility of it being restricted by limitations of gender. The deity is not a creation, rather a creator, thus it can not be limited by things that were made, like gender characteristics.

This elimination of gender from the ultimate source has led to “radical changes regarding women and society, despite the deeply entrenched patriarchy of seventh century Arabia” (Wadud 2). By attempting to eliminate a single gender controlling religious authority, Islam has, at the very least, taken steps to defy the tradition that being male is normal or ideal, instead attempting to create a culture where there is no gender bias inherent in their religious foundation.

In conclusion, it can be seen how an unequal distribution of power leading to the limitation and exclusion of gender through gender roles may develop by examining the impacts of the genderization of ultimate religious authorities. This is especially evident when exploring the genderization of religious authority in today’s religions as it related to how the subordination of women and negation of the female experience occurs in the context of religion by examining the impacts of defining a deity as being male. The effects of this genderization were shown through looking at how the Jewish tradition creates masculinity as the ideal, pointing out the logic used by the Roman Catholic Church for a male only clergy, and examining the Islamic religion’s attempt at de-gendering it’s supreme deity. While masculinity may be embedded as the norm or ideal in many religions for centuries to come,

we can begin the process of equalizing the control of power between the genders by acknowledging how and why that power struggle occurs in religion.

Bibliography

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