

Is it right for religions to treat men and women differently?

Linda Woodhead - 23 March 2013

An enduring appeal of religion is its potential to empower adherents and enable them to move beyond their circumstances. But historically and today the major world religions view women differently from men, either implicitly or explicitly. The third in this year's series of Westminster Faith Debates asks whether this is part of the nature of a particular religion or something that should be rectified. A Christian, an Orthodox Jew and a Muslim offer their perspectives

Religion acts as a positive force of social change when it offers people genuinely better alternatives to their present condition. Many people still look for this. "I wanted a religion which could break things open, not narrow them down," said a young teacher I interviewed the other day.

Throughout history, religions of all kinds have served women in this way. The Churches are no exception. Early Christianity provided an alternative to the otherwise inescapable demands of family and childbearing - the Church celebrated female saints and martyrs who heroically resisted the demands of suitors and husbands. By the medieval period, female religious communities offered women positions of great power and influence. Through their piety Christian women could become the equals of men, bending the ears of monarchs and popes and confusing social expectations. As the Steward of Leicester said of the excessively pious Marjery of Kempe when she rejected his advances: 'Eyther thu art a ryth good woman er ellys a ryth wikked woman.' She got the benefit of the doubt.

As late as the 1970s I was educated by powerful Christian women sovereign in their own domains - Anglican teachers running primary schools and Catholic nuns running convent schools. They empowered their girls in a way that the mixed comprehensive school I latterly attended failed to do, despite its more explicit promises of equality.

In Britain today the closest thing to convent schools are private girls' schools for Muslims. Like the old convent schools, they help a religious minority to maintain its integrity in the face of a dominant culture, and at their best they provide spaces for women to flourish. Wearing the turban helped Sikhs establish themselves in Britain on their own terms. The headscarf and face veil do the same for many of the British Muslim women who chose to wear them, sheltering them from what they feel to be an over-sexualised society.

But where in twenty-first century Britain do the Churches still offer women better alternatives? Since the 1970s, this question has become harder to answer. Wider society has offered women more than before - better education, better employment, better economic prospects - whilst the Churches seem to have offered less. The ordination of women hasn't helped the Church of England become genuinely hospitable to the new cohorts of powerful and talented women, and ending clerical celibacy won't help the Catholic Church either - if anything, the opposite.

The figures from [our YouGov survey](#) on the Churches and women make depressing reading. Only 6 per cent of the population express approval of the Catholic Church's current policies towards women and only 8 per cent approve of the Church of England's policies - and that includes Catholics and Anglicans. Approval for the Church of England's policies falls to 3 per cent for the large number of people who don't affiliate with any religion. Only 11 per cent of Anglicans approve of their Church's own policies, and only 22 per cent of Catholics, and the figures are not a lot higher for more actively practising Anglicans and Catholics. Indeed, even amongst the most devout and obedient Catholics, who take the Church's teaching most seriously, only about half express approval of the Catholic Church's policies towards women - and men are twice as likely as women to express approval.

In other words, in failing to make room for women's full participation in the Churches, church leaders have privileged the views of a tiny, disproportionately male group over the views of the vast majority in their own Churches and the country as a whole. It's implausible to think that none of these views are formed through faithful and thoughtful reflection. They concern a serious moral issue - how more than half the population is treated. Religion can of course flourish not only when it offers people better alternatives to the present order of things, but when it reinforces the status quo - for good or ill. But when it offers lower standards and more restrictive options than the society of which it is part, it is in serious trouble.

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A feminist and Christian perspective

Mary Ann Sieghart

'I'm seriously considering whether I should leave altogether and join a Church that treats us as equal human beings. But I don't see why I should be forced to leave a faith into which I was born'

Having been brought up by a Roman Catholic father and an Anglican mother, I've always considered myself lucky to have a choice of denomination. With the Catholics telling women not to use contraception or have an abortion, and refusing us leadership roles in the Church, it was an easy choice for me to make -

particularly after 1992, when we whooped as women priests were at last welcomed into the Church of England.

At the ordination service for the first batch of female priests in 1994, the officiating bishop reckoned it would only be ten years before the first woman bishop was appointed. He was a long way out. It's now very nearly 20 years, and the Church of England last year voted against the measure. Like many women, I felt personally insulted. Are we tainted? Inferior? Unloved by God? Of course not. So why would a religion which purports to value all humans equally go out of its way to alienate more than half its flock?

It's not just the Church of England that takes this quixotic approach, which seems to go against its founding principles. Almost every faith preaches some version of the "golden rule" and then fails to stick to it. In Christianity, it is, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." Buddhism advises, "Hurt not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful." Muhammad instructed, "As you would have people do to you, do to them; and what you dislike to be done to you, don't do to them." Yet most religions oppress women, discriminate against them, or put them in positions of inferiority that men would hate if it were done unto them. Any religion that treats women less well than men - or indeed men less well than women - is breaking the golden rule. If you wouldn't like to be treated in a certain way, then don't impose it on others. It's morally wrong.

How has this happened? The only explanation for this hypocrisy is that the cultures prevailing at the time these religions were founded were so patriarchal that oppression of women seemed natural. Just as Christians at one point saw no problem with slavery, despite everyone being equal in the eyes of God, so religions founded a millennium or two ago saw no problem with women being subservient to men. The trouble is that the world has moved on, but the Word hasn't. So, for instance, the Qur'an still gives daughters half the inheritance of sons and says that a woman's testimony in court - at least in financial matters - is worth only half that of a man's.

Similar verses in the Bible have been adduced to argue that women shouldn't hold positions of leadership in the Church. Yet plenty of other anachronistic precepts in the Bible are now conveniently ignored. "Women and girls have been discriminated against for too long in a twisted interpretation of the word of God." Not my words but those of former US President, Jimmy Carter. A devout member of the Southern Baptist Convention, he reluctantly left his Church after six decades when the Convention's leaders ordained that women must be subservient to their husbands and were prohibited from becoming deacons, pastors or chaplains. Carter points out that women often served as leaders in the early Christian Church, but that, after the fourth century, men "twisted and distorted Holy Scriptures to perpetuate their ascendant positions within the religious hierarchy ... The truth is that male religious leaders have had - and still have - an option to interpret holy

teachings either to exalt or subjugate women. They have, for their own selfish ends, overwhelmingly chosen the latter."

He is right. It is selfishness - the determination of men to hold on to a better position at the expense of women - that has allowed continued discrimination against women in almost all religions. Which is odd, as the sin that the golden rule was designed to thwart is selfishness: don't put yourself first, but do as you would be done by.

Meanwhile, women like me are left wondering whether our Church values us at all. I have now become a reluctant Anglican worshipper: Christmas and Easter, weddings and funerals. And like many others, I'm seriously considering whether I should leave altogether and join a Church that treats us as equal human beings. But I don't see why I should be forced to leave a faith into which I was born. So before making such a drastic decision, I'm going to give Justin Welby a year or two to see if he can make the Church practise what it preaches.

Mary Ann Sieghart is a journalist and broadcaster

An Orthodox Jewish perspective

Rabbi Harvey Belovski

'We must ensure that we celebrate our differences rather than exploit them, and recognise that even the slightest unexplained gender distinction may seem insensitive and even alienating'

The Jewish world has always included brave and spirited thinkers who promoted equality of opportunity even in the most inequitable of times, reflecting a strong and authentic stream of ancient Jewish wisdom. Yet the same wisdom rejects the notion that we all have the same spiritual needs. Though this is especially unpopular in the realm of gender, failure to recognise difference prevents us from celebrating our innate strengths and risks robbing religious life of much of its subtlety.

The notion that self-awareness and perception of the world commonly differ between men and women is something that every adult experiences and grapples with in day-to-day life, even though it falls outside the ambit of "acceptable" beliefs for contemporary Westerners. These differences are not good or bad, but a reality; acknowledging them strengthens society. Of course, there's no "one size fits all" even within genders; Judaism recognises the uniqueness of each individual both before God and Man, and validates each personal spiritual quest.

From a Jewish perspective, religious practice is less about everyone fulfilling a fixed set of rituals and prayers, and more about gaining personal insight, sensing the magnificent presence of God, celebrating self- and people-hood, building a just society, and, through the holy books, understanding the ways and thoughts of the

divine. Prayer, ritual and study are important tools in achieving these life goals, which are identical for both genders. Yet innate gender distinctions mean that men and women experience their relationship with the divine differently.

It is well known that Jewish religious life focuses on the home. It is primarily here, rather than in the synagogue, that traditional practices are properly experienced and Jewish values are transmitted to the next generation. In the home, as in most areas of Jewish life, men and women are afforded complete equality. However, in some aspects of public ritual, there is an obvious gender disparity in traditional Jewish communities. In Orthodox synagogues, most ritual performance, including reading from the Torah, is led by men.

These distinctions are rooted in a profound understanding of the genuinely different spiritual needs of men and women, yet play successfully to their shared need to commune with God; as such, they serve a valuable and timeless function. For example, Jewish worship incorporates the reality that men and women experience the socialising impact of group worship differently. The creation of a traditional prayer quorum (which is defined first by ten men and only then augmented by other men and women) forces competitive, often self-focused males, to regularly function as members of a harmonious co-operative, in ways that women often do intuitively.

However, while it would be a mistake to equate a religion, especially Judaism, with the conduct of its formal prayer services, as the public face of a faith, they are often assumed to characterise its attitude to important issues. In this context, I acknowledge that part of the gender imbalance in religious life may reflect the sharply-defined gender distinctions of the past, which are, perhaps, shaded by a hint of misogyny. The Jewish world, like all traditional faith societies, is innately conservative; this means that change happens slowly and only after much debate and careful reference to time-honoured sources and processes. Yet distinguishing genuine, ageless realities from some of these inequities and ironing them out where possible must be an important aspiration of every vibrant, forward-thinking religious society. It is a privilege to be part of that process in my own community - I have pioneered advanced Jewish scholarship for women for many years and I regularly guide communities on gender boundaries in ritual life - and encourage others to engage with it

So a cautious "yes": it is right, albeit within carefully-defined parameters, for religions to treat men and women differently. We must ensure that we celebrate our differences rather than exploit them, and recognise that even the slightest unexplained gender distinction may seem insensitive and even alienating. Sometimes, the greatest challenge is to struggle with the dissonance between tradition and modernity. Acknowledging nuanced gender distinctions benefits us all and, when treated with sensitivity, remains one of the great strengths of religious life.

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A Muslim perspective

Fatima Barkatulla

'When, as a student of Islamic law, I found instances where the law seemed unfair, a closer look revealed that this was not the case'

If you believe, as I do, that religion consists of the guidance and commands of the creator and lawgiver of the universe, sent down to human beings in revelation through chosen messengers, then the question whether religions should treat men and women differently is a question about God. Allah, knowing his own creation best, gave men and women roles, rights, responsibilities best suited to our nature and our ability to achieve true self-actualisation on this earth by fulfilling the purpose for our creation. These roles, rights and responsibilities are different - but that does not mean that we are not spiritually equal in the eyes of God.

Because it insists on differences between the sexes, Islam is often said to be sexist, and is contrasted with the equality of secular-liberal society. Growing up in the UK, I found the exact opposite. At the comprehensive girls school I attended I saw many fine young girls who felt under pressure to reveal their bodies and be sexually active for fear of being labelled frigid. I didn't see the liberation of women. What I saw was a recipe for the exploitation of women who had been so conditioned to believe they'd never had it better, that they were easily manipulated by their own consent. They often marvelled at the fact that I had opted out of that part of their lives, and I think they secretly wished they could too.

When I began studying Islam in depth, I found a sophisticated system of life where men and women complemented one another, and women's rights and dignity were protected. I found a sort of dual hierarchy in which men's highest duty was to their mothers, and wives' highest duty was to their husbands, and all behaved in obedience and submission to God. When, as a student of Islamic law, I found instances where the law seemed unfair, a closer look revealed that this was not the case. For example, my brother will inherit double the share that I will inherit from our parents. But my share is all for me, with no one else having a claim to it, whereas my brother's share must financially support our mother, unmarried siblings and his own wife and children. My marriage contract automatically enshrines for me the right to be provided for financially and to keep any money I own without having to contribute to the family finances - for that is a responsibility squarely placed upon the shoulders of my husband.

Muslims do not use a masculine God as either a conscious or an unconscious tool in the construction of gender roles. God is neither male nor female, and the pronoun "huwa" does not refer to the male when it refers to God. The Qur'anic text is a gender-neutral document read by men and women. It does not blame Eve for the downfall of man - both Adam and Eve are responsible and forgiven. Mary, the mother of Christ, is held up in the Qur'an and mentioned explicitly as a role model for men and women. The women around the Prophet Muhammad were not passive wallflowers. They were empowered to such an extent that they came to the Prophet for their rights, knowing they would get justice when men treated them unfairly. Muslims today who oppress women do so in contradiction to what their religion teaches, not because of it.

Is it right to expect men and women, despite their different biologies, natures, and psychologies, to run in the same race against each other? In last year's Olympics, men and women did not compete against each other. We would consider it unfair if Maria Sharapova played against Roger Federer in Wimbledon. Feminism, which was once about the need for women's rights and the desire for self-actualisation, has atrophied into careerism. It has led to the discrediting of women in their traditional roles. Their indispensable contributions to home and family are now undervalued not only by men but by women themselves. Many of us have succumbed to the idea that what men have, do and are is more desirable than what women have, do, or are. How many of us even pause to question this assumption? But the tide is changing. Yes, it is true that Islam treats men and women differently in certain aspects of life - because that is how God made us.

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The next Westminster Faith Debate on 27 March asks What is a traditional family and do we need it? The debates are organised by the Rt Hon. Charles Clarke and Professor Linda Woodhead and supported by Lancaster University, the Arts and Humanities Research Council and the Economic and Social Research Council.

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