

Women in Religion: How can religion be used to oppress and/or empower women?

Key facts

- The Bible was written by men who were influenced by the patriarchal society in which they lived, as such it can be viewed as being sexist or having a negative viewpoint towards women.
- On the other hand, there are key female figures within the Bible such as Eve and the Virgin Mary that portray women as being important and influential.
- Some feminists argue that we should concentrate upon discovering the female voice within the Bible by highlighting neglected texts that have been forgotten and reinterpreting familiar ones – as it is not the texts themselves that are oppressive but is the way that they have been interpreted through a male dominated society.
- Christians believe that the Virgin Mary is an important person because she was born without sin. As such this made her the only person that could have given birth to Jesus so that he could be the saviour of man.
 - Mary is a model of the Church and discipleship.
 - In Islam, men and women are seen as equal but with different roles.
- Some view the hijab as being liberating to women, whereas others see it as restricting.
- In Hinduism they believe that the source of energy that created and sustains our life is neither male or female.
- There are many gods and goddesses in Hinduism. The female deities celebrate the feminine qualities which are part of God/the Divine.
 - Two of the main female goddesses are Kali and Lakshmi.
- The Torah mentions that during menstruation a woman needs to sleep separate to her husband and refrain from sexual relations.

Key Vocabulary

Annuciation – When the Angel Gabriel told the Virgin Mary she was going to have a son.

Empower – To give power to.

Discrimination – The unjust treatment of groups of people based on gender, race, religion etc.

Feminism – The belief that women and men should have equal rights and opportunities.

Hadith – a record of the words of the prophet Muhammad, his family and companions. It is the second most important text in Islam next to the Qur'an.

Hijab – Head covering worn by some muslim women.

Immaculate conception – the belief that Mary was made and born to be without original sin.

Incarnation – The belief that God came down as human in the form of Jesus.

Mikvah – ritual bath that women partake in in Judaism.

Original Sin – the first sin to enter the world, when Adam and Eve disobeyed God and the rest of humanity have been tainted with this sin ever since.

Oppress – To use authority or power to treat someone in a cruel or unjust manner.

Patriarchy – Dominance of society by men.

Sexism – Discrimination, typically against women, on the basis of gender and/or believing one gender is superior to the other.

Virgin – someone who has never had sex.

Key people

Adam – Believed to be the first man on Earth. God is believed to have created him out of mud/clay.

Eve – Believed to be the first woman on Earth. Created out of Adam's rib.

Jesus – A Jewish man believed by Christians to be the Messiah and Son of God.

Kali – Hindu goddess who is considered to be the master of death, time and change.

Muhammad – Seen as the final prophet in Islam.

Lakshmi – Hindu goddess of wealth, good fortune, youth and beauty. She is the wife of the great god Vishnu.

Virgin Mary – The mother of Jesus, she is especially important to Roman Catholics.