

REVIEW ARTICLE

How religion oppresses women

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Abstract

This paper examines ways in which religion has been used to oppress women and attempts to explore how this situation can be redressed. Ever since time immemorial; religion has acted as the opium of the people across cultures all over the world as Karl- Marx observed. However, women seem to be suffering double oppression, from religious misperceptions and male dominance under the guise of religious norms. Men have enjoyed the upper hand with regards to all religious practices. Women have been marginalised in decision-making in matters pertaining to the family and themselves in relation to religion. Everybody seems to accept the status quo without question. Women have been subjected to injustice which at times amounts to abuse, without enjoying life to its fullest. Of particular reference is Christianity whose biblical teachings have been used to reinforce male dominance. For example the claim that husbands are heads of their wives and that women have to be submissive to their husbands. In some denominations, women are not allowed to preach, nor train as pastors, let alone be elected to be bishops. They are followers who are just told what to do and what not to do. This is adhered to without question. As a result, the church doctrines mainly disadvantage women in favour of men. The African Traditional ancestral worship also depicts men as ancestors neglecting he role of women in procreation. It is only through conscientisation of men that the situation could be redressed. Society should be made to realise how women silently suffer this oppression and yet they have the potential to do exceedingly well in the religious activities. If women could be given the chance, they can prove that they can do equally well as men in all aspects of religion. **Copyright © acascipub.com, all rights reserved.**

Key words: religion, opium, dominance, submission, oppression

Background

Thorne and Yalom (1992) claim that sociological literature in the 1950s and early 1960s portrayed contemporary marriage as an arrangement of love between equals using terms like ‘companionate marriage’, ‘egalitarian marriage’, ‘symmetric family’. They go on to say, love infused conventional portrayals of relationships between parents and children. In the 1970s, they argue that feminists put forth conflictual portrayal of relations between wives and husbands, and parents and children. Feminists emphasised patterns of inequality and conflict. Shulamite Firestone a feminist argued that love is the pivot of women’s oppression – love between woman and man is complicated, corrupted or obstructed by an unequal balance of power. She put forward patriarchy (rule of father over his wife and children) as the core of domination by gender and age. As a result, women and children survive harsh conditions under male domination.

On a similar note, Kaselekoane’s (2007) article on Double human alienation in African culture and Traditional African Literature exposes the plight of women in society and their helpless situation as a result of cultural biases / stereotypes/stigmatisation. The article also claims that women are dehumanised and degraded by some socio-cultural practices and beliefs. They get affected emotionally, spiritually and psychologically resulting in loss of happiness. Furthermore, the author’s view is that the alienation of women denies society the opportunity to benefit from expertise and capabilities of women.

Religion as a tool for male domination

Ahluwalia (2003) affirms that some religions teach that adults should marry and have children, but Christianity teaches that some people can choose to stay single, and /or give their lives to Christ as priests, monks or nuns. A family is said to be important – portrayed as a place where children learn to be good adults. However, Christianity particularly has its biblical teachings which legitimise male domination. The Old Testament is patriarchal as men were in control. In the Ten Commandments the wife is listed as part of man’s property as portrayed in Exodus 20:17 which states that ‘you shall not covet your neighbour’s wife, or his manservant, or maidservant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbour’s. This commandment clearly states that the wife is a possession and therefore, the man assumes a dominant role and the woman becomes docile proving that religion oppresses her. The creation story in Genesis 2:21-23 teaches that Adam was created first then Eve was created from his rib and that a woman was created for the benefit of man. Men use such teachings to dominate women.

In the teaching from the Torah on divorce in Deuteronomy 24:1, it is said that ‘If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her, and he writes a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house’. Nothing is said about a woman who finds something indecent about her husband. The teaching gives permission to a man to divorce his wife at will, putting women on an insecure position. Watton (2005) says Reform Jews allow wives to apply for a ‘get’ (certificate

of divorce) from the Bet Din. The Reform and Liberal Jews believe men and women should have equal rights in religion (they have women rabbis) therefore, they should have equal rights in divorce. If such information could be availed to all men the world over, they could change their attitude towards women. In the New Testament in Matthew 5:31-32

Jesus teaches that a man should not divorce his wife except on grounds of marital unfaithfulness. The teaching allows a man to divorce his wife but does not say what a woman should do if her husband becomes unfaithful to her. Watton (2005) continues to say the Catholic Church does not allow divorce because marriage is regarded as a sacrament to be dissolved by death of one of the partners. Such teaching makes followers stay in difficult marriages against their will. It is better to divorce than live in quarrel, bitterness and hatred. Children also get affected negatively by such situations.

Watton (2005) affirms that the traditional attitude of Protestant Christianity is that women should not speak in church and must submit to their husbands. They say it is the role of men to provide for the family and to lead the family in religion. Only men can be church leaders and teachers. The basis of their teachings is on Paul's teachings in 1 Timothy 2:11-15 which states that 'A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach, or to have authority over a man, she must be silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve and Adam was not the one deceived, it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner. But women will be saved through childbearing, if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety'. A similar teaching is found in 1 Corinthians 14: 33b -35 which reads, 'As in all the congregations of the saints, women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says. If they want to enquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home, for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church'.

The third reference is in 1 Peter 3:1-7 which reads, '...so that, if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over without words by the behaviour of their wives, when they see the purity and reverence of your lives. Your beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as braided hair and the wearing of gold jewelry and fine clothes. Instead, it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worthy in God's sight...like Sarah who obeyed Abraham and called him her master...as the weaker partner ...'. A similar teaching is found in Ephesians 5: 22-24 which says 'wives submit, to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body of which he is the Saviour. Now as the church submits to Christ so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.

Paul's letters were written contextually in relation to what was happening to those churches at that time but most denominations just take the literal sayings and use such teachings to oppress women even if they have the potential to teach or lead. The reference to Eve's fall at the beginning is used to make women have a

permanent guilt thereby disqualifying them for leadership. The role of women is emphasised as child bearing. As a result many women just submit to their husbands without question, they do not decide how many children they should bear, at what interval, even at the detriment of their health. They are encouraged to be holy so they think by being submissive they are holy. The reference to the Law intimidates them to think that what has been said is sacred. They feel that anything that is sacred should not be challenged. The reference to the fact that it is disgraceful for a woman to speak has a psychological effect. Nobody wants to be disgraceful because it is embarrassing. They are flattered through reference to beauty when told that their outward beauty of braided hair, jewelry and fine clothing is of less importance to God than their inner beauty of a gentle and quite spirit which is eternal. The example of Sarah is given to them to emulate. Their weaker physical strength is used to prove that they are less able than men. Man is said to be the head of his wife, therefore, he is given the role of leading while the wife follows with her children. Likewise, in many denominations men are leaders and women are not given any leadership positions except in their own unions. Many denominations do not allow women leadership in the form of pastors, ministers, priests let alone bishops. Biblical texts are quoted to indoctrinate them. However, now there are a few denominations that have allowed women into those leadership positions.

Some denominations have banned the braiding of hair and wearing of jewelry basing their teachings on such scriptures. It is also believed that the wearing of church uniforms by women stemmed from such teachings to avoid wearing of fine clothes. In some denominations, women including small girls cover their heads at church gatherings while others wear long dresses that are long sleeved to cover the whole body all the time except the face as a way of decent dressing. This is just accepted as church doctrines or norms.

A scripture in Leviticus 12:2-5 claims that a woman is said to be unclean during her bleeding after birth as well as her menstruation. At this time she is not allowed to touch anything sacred until she is purified. Some denominations do not even allow such a woman to congregate with others or cook for men. This has resulted in the men marrying many wives in those religious sects. The women just accept their involvement in polygamy as a religious norm even against their will. By so doing, religion acts as an oppressor for women.

A shift of attitude

Watton (2005) affirms that modern attitudes of Protestant Christianity now accept that men and women are equal; they have women ministers and priests for example, the Church of England, Methodist Church, United Reformed Church and the Baptist Church. They base their teaching on the other creation story found in Genesis 1:27 that male and female were created at the same time and equally. Also in Paul's teaching in Galatians 3:28 that in Christ 'There is no Jew nor Greek ,slave nor free male nor female for you are all one in Christ Jesus'. Such an attitude is needed the world over to restore women's humanity stolen by religious doctrines acting as oppressors. To support a woman leader, the scripture in Judges 4:4-5 says 'Deborah ,a

prophetess ,the wife of Lappidoth ,was leading Israel at that time she held court under the Palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim, and the Israelites came to her to have their disputes decided'. Watton (2005) goes on to say Deborah was a teacher during battles and people went to ask her to sort out their problems. He also says men and women should be made leaders according to ability because God gave His Holy Spirit to men and women equally. He exposes that Canada, the United States of America and New Zealand are the only countries in the Anglican Communion that allow women bishops. The Anglican Diocese of Melbourne in Australia has voted to permit women to become bishops. The move comes as other Australian Anglican leaders prepare to debate their province's ban on the practice. (The Times, 18 October, 2003), Ahluwalia (2003) claims that according to Galatians 3:28 women today believe man and women should be equal at home and at work. They believe both share the work and have equal say.

Recommendations

In the light of all the issues discussed above it is apparent that something needs to be done in order to redress the situation. The following proposals could be of great help:

- a) All denominations should acknowledge the gifts that God has given to both men and women through the Holy Spirit that He has sent to all believers.
- b) Some literature that seeks to conscientise men on the plight of women and children has to be made available to all churches.
- c) National policies should try and address the issue of inequalities between men and women.
- d) Electronic media which is accessible to almost all the people should be used in campaigns that disseminate crucial information on religious justice.
- e) Women should rise and liberate themselves from religious doctrines that are oppressive to them through speaking out and acting out their capabilities.

Conclusion

Women have been treated unfairly due to misperceptions of biblical texts. Jesus himself the founder of Christianity treated women with respect. Watton (2005) says in the Gospels he treated women as his equals. He gives examples of how he did it like preaching in the Court of Women in the Temple in Jerusalem and conversed with the Samaritan woman. He welcomed women disciples like women who stayed with him at the cross while men ran away. He visited Martha and Mary and appeared to the women first after his resurrection. Men in all the churches are encouraged to change their attitudes towards women and treat them as their equals and allow them to participate in religious activities according to their abilities.

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