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Women's Oppression in Buddhism and Catholicism

Women have historically been treated as property, objects, and as lesser people than men in their entirety. This has been reflected in an array of world politics, jobs, and abilities, with religion being no exception. Although many movements have taken place over the last century to allow women to possess even the most basic of rights, there are still some barriers deeply rooted in society. Despite their foundational differences, examples of misogyny can be seen in both Buddhism and Catholicism, two faiths that have been predominant throughout centuries of history, and are widely practiced religions in the modern world today. The fundamental differences between the two religions are demonstrated as Catholics believe in an ever-present, almighty God, whereas Buddhists do not. Buddhists believe in reincarnation and people who practice Catholicism, a branch of Christianity, do not. Despite this, both religions possess male leaders and figureheads, with strict limitations on a woman's place within their practice and ideology. As times have changed and society has become more progressive, these profound rules have increasingly begun to raise questions around the morality and biases of these establishments.

Despite the fact that both Buddhism and Christianity value acts of service, peace, and meditation that furthers spiritual enlightenment, one of their more evident similarities is that both religions have strict guidelines on who takes leadership. In *Motherhood a Metaphor* by Fordham Professor Fletcher Jeannine Hill, it was concluded that women “have been barred from education and religious education, which means that they have been barred from access to authoritative knowledge and that they have been excluded from being producers of knowledge” (Hill). This is reflected throughout both Buddhism and Catholicism as women have been prohibited from

things than a man is not. In an ethical analysis on the discrimination of women in Buddhism conducted by researcher professors Archana Paudel and Qun Dong from Southeast University in Nanjing China, it was stated that “Women are not considered as a complete entity in Buddhism. Their body is not considered fit to attain enlightenment and become Buddha. There is a concept that women are not complete until they attain enlightenment to become reborn as a man” (Paudel). The idea that women have to be reborn as a man demonstrates inferiority between gender and further contributes to religious sexism. Furthermore, nuns are women who have taken vows of “poverty, chastity, and obedience” (OED). In the Buddhist religion, it was historically believed that a Buddhist community would only be complete when it included both monks and nuns alike. Nuns, under the vows that they have taken, are instructed to obey monks by following traditions of not speaking until after the monks have spoken, eating until after the monks have eaten, and more. Nuns have generally been submissive to monks throughout their everyday lives as they must sit behind monks in rituals and cannot hold higher positions in any of the religious ceremonies. With that being said, nuns in the Buddhist religion are not obligated to live in a certain Order- of teaching or service, which is expected for nuns of the Catholic faith.

In the Catholic religion, women are unable to be priests. The Catholic doctrine stresses that priests are intended to resemble Jesus, who was a man, consequently meaning that women cannot fill this position. Moreover, Catholics refer to the supreme being of God as a male despite the fact that He is thought of to possess both feminine and masculine qualities. Many progressives argue for a better depiction of the feminine divinity of God, with theologians such as Rev. Dr. Hye Kyung Heo declaring that the “recovery of the feminine imagery of God can orient us to gender equality” (Heo). Nevertheless, other religions have taken significant steps in closing leadership gaps between men and women in religious life. For example, in 1935 Regina

Jonas of East Berlin was ordained as the first female rabbi. The position of a rabbi, a Jewish teacher and leader, has characteristically been male. Regina Jonas helped to broaden the public perspective on women in religion and by the 1960's the first American female rabbi was ordained. These women set the precedent for other women of faith, helping to encourage other females to pursue positions of spiritual leadership that have conventionally been filled by males. The spread of these ideals led to many progressive movements amongst Buddhist and Catholic women. Through the help of movements such as the International Buddhist Women's Movement in the 1970s, these once imaginable positions suddenly became very possible. In 2003, Venerable Dhammananda underwent a full monastic ordination to become bhikkhu, making her the first female Buddhist monk in Thailand, a country that is almost completely Buddhist. In recent years, Venerable Dhammananda founded her own temple, becoming an even bigger representative for women in religion.

Important changes have slowly begun to take place in the Catholic Church with the introduction of the *Spiritus Domini*, a decree that is to “allow women to be permanently installed as lectors or acolytes—essentially, readers, distributors of Communion and assistants at Mass and the sacraments” (Dulle). This decree came into fruition in 2021 as Pope Francis changed the Code of Canon Law to read “laypersons” instead of “laymen.” In addition to this change, Pope Francis continues to allocate for nuns as he urges them to fight against sexism within their establishments. Considering the significance of the Pope's position, his progressive ideals on women's equality has a substantial impact on influencing other followers of the faith. With that being said, change is essential to our religious perspective and there is still a substantial amount of work to be done amongst Buddhists and Catholics alike to close the gap between women and men in religious life and leadership.

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