

CONTEMPORARY WOMEN AND RELIGIOUS FUNDAMENTALISM

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1. Introduction

Admittedly, issues exclusively relating to women have been receiving considerable attention since the international women's year (1975) and the decade 1975-85¹. Groups of experts seeking to study the status of women all over the world are a familiar sight today. All forms of media are full of reports produced by such committees. By and large, these reports recognise that theoretically women have political and social equality with men.² All civilized societies today claim to have put an end to educational and job discrimination against women. Large numbers of contemporary women enter several important fields of life including law, medicine, politics and other fields which were traditionally considered to be spheres where only men could enter and work until the mid-twentieth century. In the developed societies of today men and women share even child care and other family responsibilities. As a result of various types of feminist movements, women have achieved greater social, economic and political involvement today³. On account of this, the fewer rights and a lower social status thrust on women in the past have been reduced considerably. The industrial age has revolutionized women's traditional roles and caused women to question their status and situation. Even sciences such as biology and psychology have concluded that women can display

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¹U. S. Kanhere, *Women and Socialisation* (Delhi: Mittal Publications, 1987), Preface.

²*The World Book Encyclopedia*, (Chicago; World Book, Inc., 1992), Vol. 7, pp.49-50.

³*The World Book Encyclopedia*, (Chicago; World Book, Inc., 1992), Vol. 21, p.293.

great activity in a variety of directions contrary to the earlier tendency to associate activity with masculine behaviour and passivity with feminine behaviour⁴.

2. Religious Fundamentalism

Meanwhile, there has broken upon the global society as a whole the menace of religious fundamentalism. As threat to the desirable progress of humankind towards better and nobler ways of living, religious fanaticism is probably more harmful and disastrous than political, racial or ethnic fundamentalism thrown up by the second half of the twentieth century. It is disturbing to note that the first century of the third millennium is likely to be dominated by a dangerous growth of religious fundamentalism all over the world. It has already made its alarming presence felt in the Balkans, West Asia, Middle East, South East Asia and the Far East, besides several parts of Africa and America. Both religious fundamentalism and political terrorism, no doubt, are being effectively confronted by various institutions, political, social and global. But the output and effects of efforts put in by such institutional agencies have not been comforting enough. In contrast, humanity oriented groups and/or individuals seem to be better suited to devise and apply effective means to control and finally eradicate religious fundamentalism. It is relevant, therefore, to think of the desirability and possibility of involving womankind of the world more abundantly than so far in the onerous task of facing and nullifying this danger.

3. Women in the World Religions

This proposal, however, begs questions such as: Do the religions of the world recognise women as equal to men? Are they favourable to inviting women's participation in eradicating religious fundamentalism? Is the status assigned today to women in world religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism,

⁴S. Freud, *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis* (London: The Hogarth Press Ltd., 1967), p. 147-8.

Christianity and Islam, for instance, congenial enough in this respect? Such questions gain relevance all the more since religion has been one of the most powerful forces⁵ shaping humankind's destiny since prehistoric times. On the one hand, Judaism, Islam and Christianity have been major influences in the foundation of western culture; on the other, the culture of Asia has been shaped by Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Shinto and Taoism. Besides, Islam has also played a crucial role in the development of the Middle Eastern Culture. It has also spread its sweetness and light to large parts of Africa, too. On the whole, in terms of the number of followers and believers, as also effectiveness of the all-round work and activities undertaken for humankind, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam have attained the status of foremost world religions. They are also considered to be the "higher religions" since the emergence of each of them at the time of their birth has marked a new departure in human history⁶. They appeared with the purpose of enabling human beings to find a direct personal relation with the transcendent reality in and behind and beyond the universe. But so far even these higher religions in their present performance and function have fallen short of their spiritual aspirations. No doubt, most of them have addressed themselves to the whole of mankind. But some have been betrayed by their institutionalization into becoming rigid in structure and intolerant in outlook especially with regard to women. Even then, it is true that religions have played an important role in human history. This is so because, on the one hand religion in general has been an integral part of the total culture of every pre-civilizational society or early civilization⁷. On the other hand, by striving to liberate human beings from their servitude to their ancestral civilizations, the higher

⁵*The World Book Encyclopedia*, (Chicago; World Book, Inc., 1992), Vol.16, p. 196.

⁶A. Toynbee, *A Study of History* (London: Oxford University Press and Thames and Hudson Ltd; 1972), p. 319.

⁷*Ibid.*, p.332 ff.

religions identified above came forth with the ability to win adherents from among the participants in more than one civilization. By virtue of their involvement in trans-credal pursuits of this kind, therefore, they remain far from dated though they have undergone many changes in the course of their history.

3.1. Hinduism

As one of the higher religions, Hinduism began about 1500 B.C.E., though the Vedas, the oldest Hindu scriptures, were composed long before that⁸. The Vedic religion intermixed with the practices and beliefs of the indigenous Indus Valley peoples inhabiting the Indian subcontinent⁹. Probably on account of this very ancient instance of its assimilative tendency, Hinduism to this day remains both an eclectic and tolerant tradition of integrating a vast variety of both religious and spiritual practices. The present knowledge about women's roles in Hinduism indicates that their position was the highest during its earliest periods. The Vedic literature indicates that women played a crucial role even as men did both in being "seers" of occult incantations, *Mantras*, and in the credal rituals. But the later primacy acquired by the Brahmin class in the area of worship rituals marginalized not only women but all males of the other castes. Within the Brahmin class also women came to be marginalized on account of the social shift to prepare female children for marriage at an early age and thus limiting their education to domestic duties. For reasons such as these, women came to be viewed by Hinduism as being less than fully human in the dominant religious practices. Yet, not all forms of Hinduism deny women's and men's equality in the religious sphere. But, as proponents of the egalitarian core of each of today's religions point out, women's subordination in Hinduism

⁸*The World Book Encyclopedia*, (Chicago; World Book, Inc., 1992), Vol.16, p. 202.

⁹Nelia Beth Scovill, "The Liberation of Women: Religious Sources"[Article from the Web].

is not just a later cultural addition. It is, in fact, contrary to the basic Hindu belief that Brahman is both male and female, or beyond gender. The roots of Hinduism thus strongly argue for egalitarian and mutual relationships between the sexes.

3.2. Buddhism

Buddhism, too, since Siddhartha Gautama founded it in the 5th century B. C. E., has consistently rejected any distinctions between men and women in regard to whether or how they attain enlightenment propounded by the Buddha. Even so, women's monastic orders were institutionally subordinated to the men's orders though in its teachings Buddhism advocated women's inherent equality. Essentially, Buddhism makes an unqualified affirmation of men and women's full and equal humanity. For instance, it advocates equality between the spouses by spelling out not only the duties wives have to their husbands but also the duties husbands have to their wives. Similarly, children are viewed as belonging to both the mother and the father. Married women are given some financial independence in that they are free to inherit property and manage it themselves. All this indicates the extent to which the egalitarian social implications of Buddhism remain resources for equalizing women's status in the society. Historically, however, Buddhism has not been a force to equalize women's status within the social sphere.

3.3. Judaism

In Judaism, founded by Abraham among the ancient Israelites in the Middle East about 4000 years ago, women played pivotal roles in the historical development of the Jewish people as well as in the religious development of Israel. The egalitarian core of Judaism affirms not only that women are fully human and created equal to men but also that God's covenant is with the whole of the Jewish people and not just with its male members. No doubt, Judaism has never endorsed a family structure free of all gender stratification. But neither has it ever endorsed a fully patriarchal family structure. In Ancient Israel,

mothers and fathers were given equal status in the family. Mutuality between husband and wife is held up as an ideal. A Jewish husband, for instance, is never allowed to beat his wife. In making decisions regarding married life, procreation, childcare, etc., women are expected to consider the well being of themselves, the family, and the born child. In spite of all this, however, Judaism has had the influence of male-dominated culture to a great extent.

3.4. Christianity

Christianity is marked by egalitarianism in both its teaching and its institutional structures. Jesus affirmed women's worthiness and included them in his community of disciples. Women became full members of the community with the same rights and duties as men. Such egalitarianism inherent in Christianity since its inception, however, was replaced with patriarchal institutional structures after the religion spread through the Mediterranean world and became the official religion of the Roman Empire. For a space, no doubt, Christianity's egalitarian vision and institutional structures survived in modified forms in monastic movements, especially in women's monasticism. The Protestant Reformation also sought to restore the New Testament vision of equality between men and women. Yet, the theology of women subordination remained dominant throughout most of history though it is in direct contradiction of Jesus' own proclamation. Jesus not only did not endorse women's subordination, he saw women as his equals. Still the dominant form of Christianity insisted that families in which men as husbands and fathers ruled over their wives and children were part of the divinely created and mandated order for human society. As a result, efforts to give autonomy or equal rights to women were considered to constitute a rebellion against God. But, according to its egalitarian core, Christianity freed women from their traditional roles of cooking and serving so they could study alongside men in the community.

3.5. Islam

Similarly, the central religious obligations of Islam are imposed on men and women alike. The community ordered by Qur'anic law was a marked improvement for women because, under the earlier Arabic law, women were reduced to the status of chattel. In contrast, Qur'anic law explicitly prohibited female infanticide, protected women in matters of marriage, gave them the right to inherit, together with men, equal responsibilities in religious life. Following the prophet's death, however, women's status in both the religious institutions and the broader Islamic culture declined. The decline was due to the consolidation of religious power into male hands. Of course, the consolidation was necessitated by Islam's spread to areas which were more rigidly patriarchal than the Arabian Peninsula. But that is beside the point. As the religion acquired greater numbers of followers and encompassed greater geographic areas, Qur'anic regulations requiring women to maintain their modesty in public were gradually expanded. Eventually, women came to be subjected to complete domestic seclusion, both in their father's home and in their husband's home. This explains why women today are not only marginalized from practising and shaping Islam's basic traditions, but also shut out of education about their basic religious obligations. In the recent centuries, few Muslim women have had any opportunity to shape or even gain first hand knowledge of their tradition. Contemporary women's subordination to men within Muslim culture has become an established fact. Thus, the view that women are inherently inferior to men is deeply imbedded in Islamic culture today though the Qur'an consistently describes the creation of humanity by God in egalitarian terms. Women's full and equal humanity is attested to not only in creation, but also on the final judgment day. The Qur'an insists that individual women and men are to be treated identically and that men and women should recognise their interconnectedness and interdependence. According to the scriptures, both men and women are members and protectors of each other. The Qur'an's vision of relationship between men and women within society is neither hierarchical

nor adversarial. It is one of equality and mutuality. But the prevailing gender situation in Islam is squarely contrary to this. The empowerment of Islamic women and the non-Islamic women in Islamic countries requires reclaiming of the egalitarian core of the tradition.

4. Contemporary Women and Religious Fundamentalism

This scenario of gender discrimination prevailing in contemporary communities of major world religions clearly indicates that each world religion has been guilty of grave aberrations in matters concerning women. It also demonstrates that due to persistent and undaunted efforts of various women's organizations and movements all over the world for the past few centuries, women have been able to establish themselves as individuals gifted with exemplary endurance on the one hand and, on the other, unique capacity to aim at and achieve desired goals of normality in the midst of aberrations or obstacles. As of today, this unique nature of contemporary woman's personality indicates that women of today are equipped with the qualities and abilities needed for the eradication of excesses inflicted on contemporary human societies such as religious fundamentalism and political terrorism. Women have been simultaneously victims of inhuman treatment meted out to them by their own religions, and crusaders tenaciously fighting the evil let loose on them by leaders of their own religious groups. The history of global women's movement for all-round emancipation shows that any struggle against any existing deep-rooted evil shall finally be able to triumph if women come forward to undertake it. The present scenario of both religious fundamentalism and political terrorism (which seem to thrive on each other) shows that an effective crusade is necessary to stem the menacing spread of their evil effects. Since they have acquitted themselves as well-tested and experienced crusaders against the evil of gender inequality and gender persecution, women of today can be projected as eminently qualified to be the only hope for contemporary humankind confronted as it is with the menacing evil of religious fundamentalism.