

Theory of Women in Religions

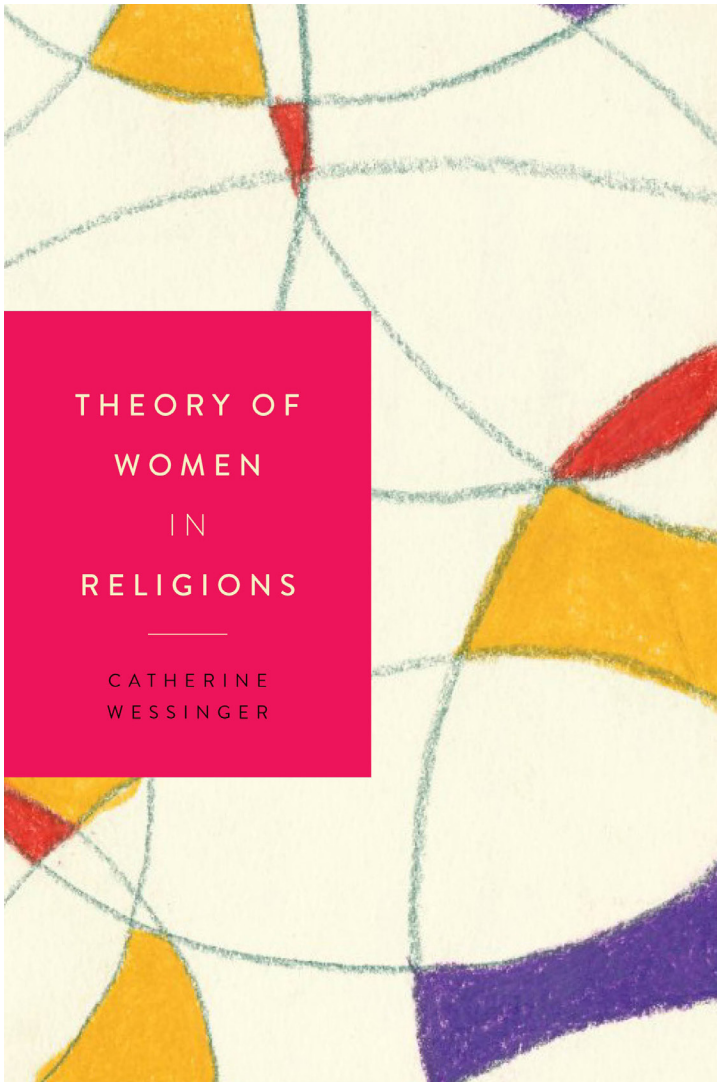
BY CATHERINE WESSINGER

Instructor's Guide

An introduction to the study of women in diverse religious cultures

While women have made gains in equality over the past two centuries, equality for women in many religious traditions remains contested throughout the world. In the Roman Catholic Church and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints women are not ordained as priests. In areas of Pakistan and Afghanistan under Taliban occupation girls and women students and their teachers risk their lives to go to school. And in Sri Lanka, fully ordained Buddhist nuns are denied the government identity cards that recognize them as citizens. Is it possible to create families, societies, and religions in which women and men are equal? And if so, what are the factors that promote equality?

Theory of Women in Religions offers an economic model to shed light on the forces that have impacted the respective statuses of women and men from the earliest developmental patterns of society through the present day. Catherine Wessinger integrates data and theories from anthropology, archaeology, sociology, history, gender studies, and psychology into a concise history of religions introduction to the complex relationship between gender and religion. She argues that socio-economic factors that support specific gender roles, in conjunction with religious norms and ideals, have created a gendered division of labor that both directly and indirectly reinforces gender inequality. Yet she also highlights how as the socio-economic situation is changing religion is being utilized to support the transition toward women's equality, noting the ways in which many religious representations of gender change over time.



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THEORY OF WOMEN IN RELIGIONS

Theory of Women in Religions is an introduction to the study of women in religions. It relates information from archaeology, anthropology, history, and psychology to a religious studies and women and gender studies approach to learning about the status of girls and women, and therefore also boys and men, in diverse religious cultures. It introduces terms from women's and gender studies and applies them to the study of women in religions. It examines theories about the origin of patriarchy and makes a judgment about which is plausible. On that basis, the book points to factors that move society and religion into male dominance and patriarchy, as well as factors that start the shift of society and religion away from male dominance toward egalitarianism. The roles of women and men are traced in developmental patterns of society from prehistory to historical periods and the present time. The book discusses key issues for women in religious societies that indicate whether girls and women are equal or subordinated. It describes ways women are pushing back against patriarchy to assert their concerns, human rights, and equality in religions.

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INTRODUCTION

Why Study Women in Religions?

This chapter discusses the ways that religions are utilized to subordinate girls and women in families and societies, and also to promote the equality of girls and women. There are religious cultures in today's world in which the struggle for equality is literally a matter of life and death for girls and women. Additionally, contemporary women of faith are struggling to gain equal access to religious leadership in their traditions. Some religious institutions and cultures have made changes, while others so far refuse to do so. All discrimination against girls and women is based on a binary view of gender that alleges differences in males and females. Education of girls and women and women's access to economic earning power can begin the movement toward the equal valuing of daughters in families, and women's equality in societies and religious traditions.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- How do you think education and economic empowerment of women might influence the status of women in religions?
- The text argues that technology, economy, and gender roles influence characteristics of religion, and that characteristics of religion influence socially constructed gender roles. When technology, economy, and gender roles change, there is pressure on the religion to change. What are examples that might illustrate this thesis?
- What are some other challenges facing women in religions that you have seen in the news or experienced firsthand?

CHAPTER 1

Foundations, Methodology, and Relevant Terms

Religious studies and women's and gender studies are compatible because of their interdisciplinary orientation. Before the 1960s the study of religion was conducted by male scholars who had an androcentric focus on the activities and ideas of men. Beginning in the late 1960s, more women entered graduate schools in religious studies and began asking questions that led to their study of women in religions. Now feminist women and men study about women in diverse religious cultures. The term "religion" is explored and defined in this chapter. "Feminism" is introduced and defined, and the characteristics of the "waves" of activism for women's rights, particularly in the United States, are discussed. Law professor Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw's concept of "intersectionality" highlights how the experiences of racism, sexism, homophobia, and class disparities and domination combine to subordinate and devalue women of color in patriarchal and white dominant societies. Scholarly feminist definitions distinguish the meanings of "sex" and "gender." Other terms relevant to the study of women in religions are introduced, defined, and discussed in this chapter. Wessinger introduces the developmental pattern of society she calls "classical patriarchy" and the economic conditions in which it developed and is sustained. Drawing on the work of anthropologists, she disagrees with scholars who assert that there have been and are "matriarchies."

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Would you call yourself a feminist? Why or why not?
- What contributions to women's equality have been made by people who have considered themselves "feminists"?
- How have feminism and religion been connected in the past? Do feminism and religion go together?
- What is "intersectionality" and how might it contribute to understanding women in religions?
- According to historian of religions Rita M. Gross, what is "quadruple androcentrism," and how does it relate to women in religions?
- What are some important questions to explore in relation to the study of women in religions?
- How is "feminism" relevant to the study of women in religions?
- What do feminist scholars mean by the terms "sex," "sexuality," and "gender"?

CHAPTER 1

- What are some of the ways that we “do gender” in our lives? How is “doing gender” related to women in religions?
- What is “classical patriarchy” and how is it related to women in religions?
- According to historian Gerda Lerner, what is “paternalistic dominance”? Is paternalistic dominance necessarily related to the mistreatment of daughters and wives? How do you think paternalistic dominance might be manifested in religions?
- Why do you think women might collude with men to perpetuate patriarchy in families, societies, and religions?

CHAPTER 2

The Economic Theory of the Emergence and Transformation of Patriarchy

Contrary to the invasion theory of the origin of patriarchy stressed by archaeologist Marija Gimbutas, this chapter traces changes in gender roles as determined by available technologies and resulting economies through the different developmental patterns of human societies. Examples of societies in each developmental pattern are described along with a consideration of how a society's gender roles affect women in religions. Based on the work of anthropologist Ernestine Friedl, an "economic theory" is articulated and related to the study of women in religions. When women have access to economic productivity, they will be valued and relatively equal to men in families and society. When women are separated from economic productivity, as in intensive agriculture (farming with a plow), girls and women are devalued and subordinated within patrilineal and patrilocal extended families. Gender roles for women and men are reinforced by myths about gods and goddesses, religious law codes, and oral and written scriptures. Currently in industrialized and post-industrial societies women are gaining access to economic productivity and they may undertake efforts to change their religious traditions to accommodate women's equality. If the religions do not change, women may leave to found or join new religious movements, or they may leave religion behind.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- What are the shortcomings of the invasion theory of the origin of patriarchy? What purpose has the invasion theory of the origin of patriarchy served for feminist women and men?
- What are your views on the economic theory of the emergence and transformation of patriarchy? Does it make sense to you? Why or why not?
- According to the economic theory presented, what are the factors that support the emergence and perpetuation of patriarchy and ultimately the transformation of patriarchal society?
- What do you think the female figurines from the Paleolithic Period and the Neolithic Period indicate about prehistoric religion and actual women?
- What were women's likely roles and statuses at the beginning of the Neolithic Period? What were women's roles and statuses by the end of the Neolithic Period? What socio-economic changes contributed to this change?

CHAPTER 2

- What does archaeology tell us about women and men, gender roles, and religion at the Neolithic town known as Çatalhöyük? What do you think were women's roles in the religion and society at Çatalhöyük?
- What were the economic contributions of Apache women when the Apaches were egalitarian foragers, and how did the Apache religion reflect women's gender roles?
- In the Yorùbá culture in southwest Nigeria, what are the gender roles and traditional economic activities of women and men, and how are these reflected in the indigenous Yorùbá religion?
- What did archaeologist Jeannine Davis-Kimball learn about women's roles in the cultures of the Eurasian Steppe that buried their dead in mounds known as *kurgans*? Do you think women were equal or subordinated in the steppe societies and their religions? What types of work, including religious work, did women do, and how is it known to archaeologists?
- What is the economic basis of society in the North Indian village of Karimpur, and what are the roles for women and men in that society? What is the significance of *vratas* (vows) for the Hindu women living in Karimpur?

CHAPTER 3

Psychological Theories of Gender Roles and Women's Self-Esteem

Several feminist psychological theories are described in this chapter for consideration by the reader. Nancy Chodorow and Dorothy Dinnerstein articulate psychoanalytic theories that propose reasons for the widespread dread of women in leadership positions in patriarchal societies with distinct gender roles. They advocate for fathers' involvement in child nurturing to contribute to the ultimate ending of attitudes that perpetuate male dominance. Psychologist Linda E. Olds locates a basis of patriarchy in dichotomous thinking, which is common in human societies and religions. She identifies the binary gender roles found in patriarchy as "feminine-identified women" and "masculine-identified men" and an alternative gender role that persons may adopt to express themselves as being "fully human." Feminist Gloria Steinem emphasizes the need for a "revolution from within" to build up the self-esteem of girls and women that is brought down by patriarchal attitudes and treatment, and she suggests ways to accomplish this. These psychological theories are related to the study of women in religions since patriarchal religions can be detrimental to the self-esteem of girls and women. On the other hand, egalitarian religions promote self-esteem of girls and women, women's leadership, and provide resources that can be utilized to empower girls and women.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- According to feminist psychological theories, what are the factors that support the emergence and perpetuation of patriarchy? What psychological factors contribute to the transformation of patriarchy toward egalitarian families, societies, and religions?
- What is your opinion of the psychoanalytic theories of Nancy Chodorow and Dorothy Dinnerstein of why people resist having women in positions of authority? What sorts of evidence supports or contradicts these theories? According to Chodorow and Dinnerstein, what sorts of changes are needed to end the social and psychological reproduction of patriarchy? What is your opinion of their proposed changes?
- According to psychologist Linda E. Olds, what is the problem with dichotomous thinking? How does she describe a *feminine-identified woman*, a *masculine-identified man*, and *androgynous women and men*? How do these different types of individuals "do gender"? What are the social advantages and disadvantages of each way of "doing gender"? How do these different ways of "doing gender" relate to women in religions?

- Feminist activist Gloria Steinem argues that there is need for women to experience a “revolution from within” in regards to their personal self-esteem in addition to social revolution toward equality. What is your opinion of Steinem’s thesis? How does her stress on the need for women’s self-esteem and ways to accomplish it relate to religions?

CHAPTER 4

Issues for Women in Religions

Eleven issues affecting the status of women in religions are discussed while providing descriptions of examples found in diverse religious traditions. Negative manifestations of these issues in religions contribute to and reflect the devaluing of girls and women and their subordination in families and society, while the positive manifestations of these issues are beneficial to girls and women and empower them in their religious cultures. The constructive manifestations of the issues are found in religious societies in which daughters and women are valued, and women have access to economic productivity rather than being economically dependent on men. The eleven issues examined in this chapter are: gender roles; marriage and divorce; women's property rights; myths and doctrines about the cause of the limitations of the human condition; views of women's bodies; violence against girls and women; women as religious specialists (either as shamans and other leaders with charisma, or as credentialed religious leaders); goddesses and other concepts of the divine; rituals (females' inclusion in rituals, women's rituals, and rituals affirming girls and women); equality of LGBTQ persons; whether or not there is movement beyond patriarchy.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- What are factors that support equality and subordination of women in religions? How might factors supporting equality be optimized in a religious tradition?
- What are your opinions of the examples given of issues affecting women in religions?
- In addition to the issues listed in the chapter, what other key issues do you think are important to support either women's equality or subordination in religions and societies?
- How are *distinct gender roles* manifested and reinforced in religions? What is your opinion of strongly distinct gender roles? What are the ways they affect women's lives?
- What does *complementarity* mean in relation to gender roles? How might this view of gender manifest in religions?
- What does *mutuality* mean when discussing gender roles? How might this view of gender manifest in religions and religious practice?
- What are the various religious specialist roles that might be available to women?
- What are the social circumstances that make different types of religious leadership roles available to women?

CHAPTER 4

- How is *charisma* defined in the text? What is the significance of *charisma* to women's religious leadership?
- What are the different expressions of *shamanism*, and how do they relate to women in religions?
- What are the different ways that a woman may gain *credentials* to be a religious leader?
- What can the study of goddesses reveal about how real women are viewed in a religious culture? Do goddesses necessarily promote the equality of women?
- What are examples of rituals that tell us something about women's religious lives? Do you think these rituals benefit women in some way, or do they disempower women religiously and socially? How?
- What is the relevance of LGBTQ studies and queer theory to the study of women in religions?
- What are the factors that are needed to move women in religions beyond patriarchy toward equality?

CONCLUSION

Patriarchy/male dominance is produced by complex combinations of technological, economic, and psychological factors that shape gender roles in families, societies, and religions. Gender roles are shaped by the available technologies for survival and the resulting division of labor between women and men. The most extreme form of patriarchy—classical patriarchy—occurs when women are separated from economic productivity. A society's gender roles are reflected in and reinforced by religious narratives/myths, concepts of divinity, religious leadership roles and whether they are accessible to women, and religious law codes. Even after intensive agriculture, the economy that produced classical patriarchy, has been superseded by other available technologies and resulting economies, patriarchal gender roles and attitudes continue to be perpetuated by religious traditions until women possessing a degree of access to education and economic earning power begin to assert their right to equality. Some religious organizations and cultures are changing to accommodate expectations for equality of girls and women, but others are refusing to change. Facing resistance to the equality of girls and women, if there is sufficient freedom in the society, women may leave a patriarchal religion to found or join a new religious movement, or women may leave religion altogether.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- What kinds of changes are we seeing in societies and religions today relating to girls and women? Where is continued resistance to women's equality manifested and what form is it taking? What are women and men doing to try to overcome the resistance to women's equality in society and religions?
- What changes are needed in religious societies or organizations that oppress women? What are the types of factors that will support those changes?
- What do you think will be most strategic approach to enhancing the status of women: work to improve women's status in society, or work to improve women's status in religion?
- Where do you think we are going in terms of women and gender roles in society and in religions?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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