

Isabella Melians

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: American Heritage School, Plantation, FL
Educators: Diana Adams, Raquel Bolanos, Susann Price

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Women's Spirituality: An Analysis

Historically, women held fundamental roles within various religions. These religions centered on the idea of a “Great Goddess,” an archetypal image found in historical ruins worldwide, which revered women and their ability to produce life, even centering politics and arts around the notions of the ‘Divine Feminine.’ In the Eastern Hemisphere circa 6 A.D. there existed groups like Celtic mythology, Maguzawa, and Shinto religion in which female deities like Amateratsu played prominent roles. Similarly, in the Western Hemisphere, Ix Chel of Mayan mythology, and Xochiquetzal of Aztec mythology were fundamental female figures involved in South American worship. As Christianity spread West and dominated smaller religions, these distinct cultures were drowned out by a new idea: the ‘Divine Masculine.’

Within these patriarchal religions, women were pushed to the side. Nature-based religions became “witchcraft”, leading to the slaughter of women across Europe and the Americas and the enforcement of female figures into subordinate roles, further distancing them from their inherent power. The knowledge that had been passed amongst generations of female healers and leaders was discredited, deeming them as ‘Satan’s followers’ by the Church and invoking witch hunts (Jefferson et al, 2015) due to cheaper medical treatments provided by spiritual women that threatened the medical monopoly. Today’s largest religious group, Christianity, first presented feminine energy as an object of ‘sin’. The Bible framed women in a tempting and manipulative light, even giving them the perceived consequence of painful childbirth, which was once seen as a revered and holy gift - in favor of men maintaining the powerful roles (Lippy, 2005) society rejected female-led positions, despite the fact that women dominated the religious population.

When analyzing history’s most powerful religious leaders, the list is almost exclusively limited to male figures, like Jesus Siddhartha and Moses. This continues to hold practical effects in the modern world - in fact, some religions still strictly forbid female clergy, including Orthodox Jews and Roman Catholics (Gender Gap Religion 2016). In some countries, laws are even written to maintain the power of patriarchal religion. “Anti-discrimination laws in the Sex Discrimination Act mean that organizations in Australia must not discriminate against any individuals based on their gender. But the law allows for special exemptions, such as religious grounds. Under these exemptions, religious organizations are free to refuse to allow women to ordain as clergy” (Alba, 2019).

While women’s spirituality was silenced, men used religion as political tools and a justification for violence (Miller, 2021). Holy Empires hid behind their God as cause for wars and conquest, including the Spanish conquistadors in the New World, who killed over eight million Indigenous Americans in search of economic prosperity in the name of ‘Christianity’. When the Puritans later migrated to America, religion was involuntarily forced upon Native tribes, even going so far as to create ‘praying towns’ where Native Americans were unwillingly converted to the Puritanical religion. Similar to traditional worship of the Divine Feminine, Native Americans practiced a variety of animistic and polytheistic religions. This too was slowly overturned into Abrahamic-based beliefs. Although religion-based violence has decreased with time, its effects are still present in modern society with the predominance of patriarchal religions.

In addition to this, present-day governments and practices center around the notion of the Divine Masculine. This practice extends from individuals, such as swearing oaths on Bibles during legal proceedings, to national representatives “sealing their oath of office with ‘so help me God’” (Fahmy 2020). In many countries, Abrahamic-based religions have developed extremist Orthodox groups, which oppress women and children in an attempt to bring the religion back to the literal meaning of traditional scripture, including the Taliban and The Army of God. Religion is now used as a means to control individual expression and to silence voices that disagree with teachings,

like abortion, homosexuality, and superstition, rather than as a way to connect with spiritual practices and energy.

As women found this system increasingly suffocating, they began to turn to individual practices, rather than community-based religions, choosing to reconnect with their spirituality away from the public eye. A new wave of revivalist movements swept across the globe as millennials turned to Pagan and Wicca-based practices, like astrology and meditation. To some, these rituals represent “a way of being ritualistic that isn’t dogmatic, isn’t sexism, [that] doesn’t have a history of empirical violence” (Roy, 2019). This was, in effect, a method of returning the Divine Feminine to modern women. Layne Redmond, author of *When Drummers Were Women: A Spiritual History of Rhythm*, comments that, “Women need the archetypal image of a Divine Female. We need to reconnect with the inherent sacredness of women as creator and nourisher, rather than accept a vision of ourselves as less-than-divine inferiors” (Layne Redmond, 1997). In accordance with historical trends, the new-age spiritualist movement has been shunned by society and associated with various ignorant perceptions. Public forums have been crowded with criticism, with one user writing “Yeah, to me, it indicates that the person who believes in astrology is prone to non-scientific thinking; this opens the floodgates to being coaxed into other, more potentially dangerous lines of thinking” (Reddit, 2021). This misogyny has acted as a deterrent for women to explore new-age spiritualism, a modern-day representation of the similar issues their ancestors faced.

One possible explanation for this response is that new-age spiritualism focuses on the darker traits of an individual, without shying away from “taboo” topics like self-sabotage and misperception. This conflicts with how society traditionally views masculine people, forcing them into the stereotype that “Emotions are for women” (Ewens 2018). Women are also traditionally encouraged to portray the “damsel in distress” trope, depicting a melodramatic overflow of emotion and giving them the opportunity to frequently confront their feelings in a method akin to the practices of new spiritual religions; this trope, however, is not extended to men and their emotional states. While patriarchal religions typically offer repercussions for not following practices strictly enough, including the Christian concept of eternal suffering in Hell and the South Asian concept of the ‘cycle of samsara,’ matriarchal practices focus on bettering an individual in the present moment. As has been historically demonstrated, men often attempt to “fix” an issue, while women attempt to understand it as it is.

Although gendered religion continues to be a relevant issue in society, both groups maintain an important role - not only within religious implications, but in relation to economic and political issues, as well. Similar to Daoist beliefs, both masculine and feminine energies are necessary to maintain a balanced soul. This makes it vital for men and women to overcome patriarchal paradigms that distance women from seeking their feminine energy. With this cooperation, a new age of religion will be overturned, where both genders are able to embrace their spiritual history.