

1.2 A study of the world religions shows a connection between images of God and gender roles

I will be discussing this statement in relation to Judaism and Christianity. Gender is an ambiguous word, in its broadest context it can be defined as the distinction between masculine and feminine roles and functions that are often historically or culturally conditioned. In both monotheistic faiths God is neither male nor female. These have become androcentric over the centuries but when we look at the sacred texts we see the essential message is one of equality.

The holy scripture of Judaism, the Torah, has influenced gender roles. Although Jewish scholars have studied the 10 commandments and stated that men and women are both required to adhere to each one in the same way men have more religious obligations than women. They are expected to pray 3 times a day. Read the Torah and wear tzitzit (shawl) and tefillin (leather box) during Morning Prayer.

In the Old Testament the Genesis creation story states that Yahweh created mankind last, it was His final and most intelligent creation. Eve came from the rib of Adam and therefore women were created last. This has led to the Jewish belief that women are endowed with a greater degree of **binah** than men meaning understanding.

This has influenced the role of women as the Torah commands challah, which is a portion out of every large batch of dough, must be given to a Kohen for it to become holy and eaten on Sabbath. This role is not permissible to be carried out by a man. As well as this it is because of a mother's faith and not the father's that a child is born Jewish if the child is born with a gentile.

This masculine image of God is due to the historical context of the Torah. When the Jews were being persecuted in Egypt God was seen as a masculine military leader, then when Moses led the Israelites to freedom God was viewed very much as a liberator.

Jews believe that humans were created in the image of God '**so God created mankind in his image**' but not in the physical sense, rather in the sense that our essence is similar as we have the ability to understand and discern. Therefore God in Judaism has no specific gender, although the traditional interpretation of God was very much masculine. Due to this Jewish men have Men lead the public life and are responsible for spiritual leadership.

A more modern egalitarian image of God has affected gender roles as Reform Judaism led the way as they first ordained women as Rabbis in 1972. In 1983 the Conservative movement followed.

In Christianity the sacred text, the Bible, is very much egalitarian about the roles of men and women. Jesus believed men and women were equal in value but not in purpose. Early Christianity held women in the same regards as men. In a letter from St.Paul to the Galatians, he stated **there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.** This shows the early equality of the Church. Christianity began during a period in history that was extremely patriarchal. Yet when examining the gospels it is clear that both men and women played important roles in the early Church. In the Acts of the Apostles Priscilla and the Pauline letters there is reference to the missionary couple Priscilla and Aquila. Priscilla is considered to be the first example of a female teacher in early church history. Coupled with her husband, she was a celebrated missionary a friend and co-worker of Paul.

Women held leadership positions. The only named deacon in the New Testament is Phoebe that seems to be Paul's representative to the Church in Rome. Saints **Perpetua and Felicity** are women Christian martyrs of the 3rd century.

However in 325 AD the Church began to distort the books of the Bible at the Council of Nicaea and altered the letters of St.Paul – as suggested by historians, the Christian culture became very patriarchal and kept women down for centuries. They claimed God was masculine and a man due to Jesus being the embodiment of God on earth. Therefore it became that if you disobeyed your husband you were disobeying God.

In Timothy women are not permitted a woman to teach or be above a man. In Corinthians it is shameful for a woman to speak in church. Rather than emphasising Isaiah or Galatians, these were focused on, leading to women's subordination as official policy in almost all churches. Today the role of men is still one predominantly characterised by **leadership** within the different Christian churches. In the Roman Catholic Church today men hold all positions of power from the priest through to the pope. They do not see this as an equality issue stating that it has no power to confer priestly ordination on women.

The majority of Christian churches now acknowledge that women and men are created equally in God's image. In 1992 after much debate the Church of England decided to allow women to become priests. Today the Catholic Church encourages women to become involved in different types of leadership. They can work in the Vatican, as chaplains and as diocesan advisors.

It is now widely accepted that Jesus is the greatest image of God but **not** in the physical sense. Jesus revealed the nature of God through his words, actions and sacrifice. Christian's image of God is completely connected to the study of the person of Jesus. Jesus called both men and women to be disciples.

Today in many Christian traditions the image of God as a loving, compassionate and egalitarian has returned to the fore. There is now an emphasis on the Book of Isaiah in the New Testament who portrays God as a woman giving birth. This increase in the image of God being more feminine has been welcomed as followers appreciate the feminine 'loving' characteristics of God.