As a spiritual feminist, my main focus here will be to examine patriarchal violence against women and children as expressed in religious scriptures around the world which have condoned, even incited, domestic violence against women and children. The violence against “inferior” women and children within the privacy of the family has in turn buttressed male-centered, patriarchal rule in social systems in the public sphere. The spiritual and physical coercion of women and children by violence or the threat of violence, as sanctioned through religious teaching, has distorted and damaged the human character of men and women, girls and boys. Social relations are promulgated that are unnecessarily harsh and hostile, and which time and again erupt into bloodshed and extreme suffering. I see this as a form of madness that is in need of profound, embodied, psycho-spiritual healing.

Globally, at least one in three women and girls has been beaten or sexually abused in her lifetime. More than 130 million girls and women have been subjected to female genital cutting. Internationally, over one million women and children are trafficked each year for forced labor, domestic servitude, or sexual exploitation. At least sixty million girls who would otherwise be expected to be alive are “missing” from various populations, mostly in Asia, as a result of sex-selective abortions, infanticide, or neglect.

In the United States, domestic violence is the leading cause of injury to women,
causing more injuries than muggings, stranger rapes, and car accidents combined.\textsuperscript{6} Each day, on average, three women are murdered by a husband or boyfriend.\textsuperscript{7} More than four million women are battered by their partners each year, one woman every nine seconds.\textsuperscript{8} Of battered women, 25 percent are pregnant.\textsuperscript{9} One and a half million women are raped and/or physically assaulted by an intimate partner each year.\textsuperscript{10} The overwhelming majority of domestic violence (92\%) is by men against women.\textsuperscript{11} In the U.S., 40 to 60 percent of men who abuse their partners also abuse children.\textsuperscript{12} A child’s exposure to the father abusing the mother is the strongest risk factor of transmitting violent behavior from one generation to the next.\textsuperscript{13} The majority of women who are battered by domestic partners batter their own children, in turn, while the children of abused mothers are six times more likely to attempt suicide and 50 percent more likely to abuse drugs and alcohol.\textsuperscript{14} As Esta Soler, executive director of the Family Violence Prevention Fund sums up, “Domestic violence fills emergency rooms and morgues, contributes to juvenile delinquency, and destroys families.”\textsuperscript{15}

How can contemporary society tolerate or condone so much abuse? Patriarchal religious traditions and patriarchal political systems work together to enforce male-dominant values and patterns for men, women, and children. Violence by males against women and children is often excused as being God’s will and law. Punishments for women’s or children’s disobedience of fathers or husbands are often severe, sometimes deadly. Since the vast majority of the world’s population, 86 percent, belongs to religious traditions,\textsuperscript{16} it is crucial for women and men and children to be able to discern which aspects of religious teachings are the distortions of patriarchal special interests, and which may be genuinely divine.

The world’s religions, to be sure, have had many positive effects on people’s lives, often teaching and encouraging love, respect, and reverence for life and the Source of all life. The mystic heart of religion has been preserved and transmitted from generation to generation for thousands of years. Yet, far too often, the male supremacist features of religions have distorted, corrupted, or thwarted the central message of love.

The scriptures I will focus on here come from Taoism, Confucianism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Although these traditions extol social justice and human rights, basic human rights are often explicitly denied to women and children. Women are commanded to be unconditionally obedient to father, husband, and/or sons. This male dominance is generally rationalized by the repeated insistence on the mental, moral, and spiritual superiority of men and the inferiority of women.
This in turn is used to control women’s labor, sexuality, and reproduction. Probably the most harmful aspect of patriarchal bias in scripture is the suppression or official denial of the Sacred Feminine.

Let us begin this survey of patriarchal scriptures by turning briefly to China, which contains more than 1.3 billion of the world’s 6.4 billion citizens, and where the three religious traditions of Taoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism co-exist. In China, as in most regions of the world, one finds mixed messages about the spiritual significance of women and the Sacred Feminine, and the “religiously correct” relationships of men and women.

The eldest of the religious traditions in China, Taoism, expresses equal respect for yin and yang, the masculine in balance with the feminine. The primary scriptures of Taoism—the *Tao Te Ching* or *Way of Life*, attributed to the 5th century BCE sage Lao Tzu—praise the feminine and maternal aspects of the Tao.

Before creation a presence existed,
Which yet pervaded itself
With unending motherhood.
Though there can be no name for it,
I have called it “the way of life.”

The Valley Spirit never dies.
It is named the Mysterious Female.
[It] is the base from which Heaven and Earth sprang.

The source of life is as a mother. Be fond of both mother and children, but know the mother dearer, and you outlive death.

On the other hand, Confucian religion subordinated children to parents, women to men, political subjects to masters. Confucius (551–479 BCE), the most influential sage of imperial China, himself had few words for women: “Women and people of low birth are very hard to deal with. If you are friendly with them, they get out of hand, and if your keep your distance, they resent it.” His attitude of male superiority was reflected in his followers continuing many anti-woman teachings. Women were to be obedient, their primary function was for procreation, and a double standard regarding sex was imposed against women. According to the *Confucian Book of Rites*: “A girl at the age of ten ceased to go out [from the women’s apartments]. Her governess
taught her pleasing speech and manners, to be docile and obedient…to learn woman’s work…”22 As for a wife: “once mated with her husband, all her life she will not change her feeling of duty to him, and hence, when the husband dies, she will not marry again.”23

With Communism as the new “religion” in China, male dominant customs persist. To counter this, a new 20-year program endorsed by the state Family Planning Commission responsible for population policy, is working to bring an end to the patriarchal bias that has favored boy children over girl children for millennia.24

In India, home to 1.07 billion of the world’s population,25 Hinduism is the main religion. It combines the powerful personal devotional traditions (bhakti) centered on goddesses and gods, with the ascetic tradition of forest dwellers which included yogic meditational practices, and with the sacrificial traditions centered on the Vedas.

During the early period of the Hindu scriptures called the Vedas, in the verses of the Samhitas (2500–1500 BCE), many powerful goddesses were worshiped, women held spiritual authority and participated equally in some rituals,26 education was not denied to women, widow remarriage was permitted (Rig Veda 10.18.8,9), and there was neither purdah (the veiling of women) nor suttee (widow-burning).27 However, in other passages in the Vedas, a rigid system of social classes or castes was established as divine plan (Rig Veda X.90.11–14), women were denied property rights, and wives were legally declared the property of husbands.

From 1500–500 BCE, in the Brahmanas, Upanishads, and Vedic commentaries, the status of women declined. Women’s right to perform ritual was abolished, and religious education was denied.

No sacrifice, no vow, no fast must be performed by women apart (from their husbands), or she will be consigned to hell. The preference for male sons was promulgated by male Brahmins: Seek a son, o Brahmins… A wife is a comrade; a daughter, a misery. And a son, a light in the highest heaven. A son-less one cannot attain heaven.28

Aitareya Brahmana, 7.13

The Laws of Manu, written down around 100 CE, are still considered a spiritual and moral guide for Hindus today. Women’s status was reduced to the equivalent of the lowest class, the Sudras.29 “In childhood a woman must be subject to her father; in youth to her husband; when her husband is dead, to her sons. A woman must never
be free of subjugation.”  (Laws of Manu V.148) Such subjugation is to be unconditional: “Though [he be] destitute of virtue, or seeking pleasure [elsewhere], or devoid of good qualities, [yet] a husband must be constantly worshiped as a god by a faithful wife.” A husband is explicitly given the right to beat his wife: “A wife...who has committed faults, may be beaten with a rope or a split bamboo.”  (Laws of Manu, VIII:299) Male domination was abetted by lowering the marriageable age of girls to twelve, or even eight years of age: “A man, aged thirty years, shall marry a maiden of twelve who pleases him, or a man of twenty-four a girl of eight years of age.”  (Laws of Manu, IX:94) Widow re-marriage was generally denied: “nor is a second husband anywhere prescribed for virtuous women.”  (Laws of Manu, 5:162, 9:69)

From about 500 BCE to 500 CE, the Mahabharata and the Ramayana epics became enormously influential as religious teachings. The Mahabharata affirmed the custom of suttee (not outlawed until 1829). The most well-known section, the Bhagavad-Gita, affirmed as a wife’s religious duty her unquestioning obedience to her husband, even when he is wrong.

In contrast to the three Abrahamic traditions, Hinduism still celebrates the worship of both goddesses and gods. The largest goddess festival in the world, held every fall in Kolkata (Calcutta), gathers some 35 million people. “The Shakta tradition conceives of the essence of ultimate Being as completely female. The first step in approaching her, however, is to concede that “She and He are ultimately indistinguishable, thus she is 100 percent male, and he is 100 percent female.”

While the status of women has improved since India won independence from Britain in 1947, arranged marriages are still common, and according to a UN study, “an Indian female infant is 16 percent less likely to survive than a male infant. From age 1–4, a female child’s death rate is 50% higher than that of a male child...” A growing, activist, feminist movement is fighting against the denigration and subjugation of women and girls, and the overlooked murders of girl babies and young brides.

Buddhism emerged from India during the 5th century BCE and was transported to China in the 2nd century CE and subsequently spread throughout Asia. The Buddha taught that enlightenment was equally available to men and women: “Whoever has such a vehicle, whether a woman or a man, / Shall indeed, by means of that vehicle / come to nirvana.” In some traditions, there emerged a special respect for the enlightened female saint or bodhisattva: in China, the compassionate Kuan Yin; in Tibet, Tara; in Japan, Kwannon. The Buddha accepted women into the
Sangha, the community of Buddhists, and approved the creation of an order of nuns. But male monastic orders of Buddhism have generally relegated women to inferior and subordinate status, citing “The Eight Chief Rules” attributed to the Buddha, which insisted that nuns treat monks as seniors and superiors, and that nuns’ formal ceremonies be conducted only under the supervision of monks. A strong contemporary movement of Buddhist women teachers and practitioners is working to change these gender inequities.

The issue of whether men and women are equal as human beings, or whether women should be submissive to men, was also addressed in the Hebrew Bible and Christian Bible. The book of Genesis provides two versions of human creation by God, one where man and woman are created equal in the image of God, and a second version, where man is created first and woman afterwards, as a helper for the man. According to the first, more egalitarian version: “And God said, Let us make humanity in our image, after our likeness… So God created humanity in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them.” (Genesis I: 26–27) But it is the second version that has been emphasized by patriarchs of both Judaism and Christianity: “And the Lord God said, It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an help meet for him…” (Genesis 2:18–25). Then Eve ate the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge and tempted Adam to do the same, after which God allegedly said to womankind, “I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception: in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and your desire shall be to your husband, and he shall rule over thee.” (Genesis 3:16) Thus the institution of male dominance was enshrined as if it were the will of God.

In the Bible, one finds explicit images of violence against women and children that could not have been ordained by a compassionate and merciful God. The greatest of these sufferings, for women and children as well as men, are the plagues of war. For example, we are told that when the Israelites attacked the Midianite peoples and destroyed their cities and all the men, they took the women, children, cattle, and sheep as spoils. They were then commanded to “kill every male among the little ones, and kill every woman that hath known man by lying with him. But all the women children, that have not known a man by lying with him, keep alive for yourselves. … thirty and two thousand persons in all.” (Numbers 9-35)

Of course, not all brides were captured. Undoubtedly there were many love-marriages within Judaism of that time, as indicated by the Song of Songs, with its sensual affirmation of sexual love (celebrated in a new translation by Jewish theologian Marcia...
Falk). But some Jewish brides were first raped, and then married. The rapist of an unbetrothed virgin was allowed to pay her father 50 shekels of silver to marry the girl. (Deuteronomy 22:28–29) In contrast, the customary punishment for a bride discovered not to be a virgin on her marriage night was that: “They shall bring out the damsel to the door of her father’s house and the men of her city shall stone her with stones that she die.” (Deuteronomy 22:20–21) These cannot be God-given laws, rather these are the patriarchal customs by which a father exerts absolute power over a daughter, including the right to own and sell her to another man—regardless of the daughter’s wishes—or even to have her murdered.

The Christian religion also contains mixed messages about the status of women and children. Jesus himself affirmed the spiritual equality of all: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.” (Galatians 3:28) He defied an angry village to protect Mary Magdalene from being stoned to death. (John 8:3–11) He included women in his innermost circle of disciples, and empowered them in their spiritual presence and witnessing. (John 11:1–45, John 20:18) It was first to Mary Magdalene, scriptures say, that Jesus appeared after rising from the tomb. (John 12:1–8) However, the gospel attributed to Mary Magdalene was not included in the canon of New Testament writings selected by the early church fathers and women’s spiritual leadership in the early Christian church was suppressed.

In some teachings of Jesus’s followers, we find the repeated effort to command woman’s submission. “You wives, be in subjection to your own husbands…while they behold your chaste conversation coupled with fear…be a meek and quiet spirit, which is in the sight of God of great price.” (I Peter 3:1–4) “Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord… Therefore as the church is subject unto Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in every thing.” (Ephesians 5: 22–24)

Women’s submission was yoked to her silencing. “Let women learn in silence with all subjection… I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence…” (I Timothy 2:11–12) “Let your women keep silence in the churches, for it is not permitted unto them to speak, but they are commanded to be under obedience…” (I Corinthians 14: 34)

The myth of Eve’s culpability for humanity’s expulsion from the Garden has been used through the centuries as a model for scapegoating women for the social ills of patriarchal societies and families. This pathology erupted most massively during the Middle Ages and early modern age with the torture and burnings by the Catholic and
Protestant church hierarchies of many thousands, perhaps millions, of women accused of being witches in Europe and in the Americas—a holocaust against women rationalized (in part) by citing scripture. (*Exodus* 22:18) This European epidemic of misogyny, torture, and terrorism against women has never been officially and fully recognized, nor atonement made, by the Catholic and Protestant churches that conducted these persecutions.

Christian theologian Rita Nakashima Brock believes that a theology centered on the Father’s sacrifice of the Son, combined with the extolling of martyrdom, is too readily misused as a set-up for men’s patriarchal abuse of women and children in the home. In corroboration of this view:

A Survey conducted by the National Division of the United Methodist Church’s Program of Ministries with Women in Crisis in 1980 and 1981 indicates that one in every twenty-seven United Methodist women had been raped, one in every thirteen had been physically abused by her husband, one in every four had been verbally or emotionally abused. Of the respondents, both male and female, one in nine knew of a close friend or relative who had been raped, one in six knew of physical abuse, one in five knew of emotional abuse.

Regarding the domestic abuse of children, there currently is a national debate among evangelical Christians in the U.S. as to the appropriateness of corporal punishment for children. Some Evangelicals believe spanking is a religious duty, following the admonishment that “he who spares his rod hates his son, but he who loves him disciplines him promptly.” (*Proverbs* 13:24). Scriptures which exhort the physical punishment of children are being quoted from church pulpits, on radio and television shows, and on the internet (selling paddles and rods). Yet other evangelical Christians, believing that the teachings of Jesus do not support such punishment, are actively organizing in opposition to this religiously rationalized, patriarchal abuse of children.

Islam is the third of the Abrahamic religions emerging from the Middle East that traces its origins to the Age of Patriarchs (c 2000–1800 BCE) and to the common ancestor Abraham. Muslims accept many of the teachings of the Jewish *Bible* and Christian *Bible*, and to these add the sayings of the *Koran* believed to have been given to the prophet Mohammed by the angel Gabriel in the 7th century CE. Here again one finds passages—both in the *Koran*, and in the teachings of Mohammed that came to be recorded posthumously in the *Hadith*—that affirm the equality of men and

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women, and of all people. “And the believers, men and women, are protecting friends one of another.” (Koran, 9:71) “All people are equal, as equal as the teeth of a comb. There is not claim of merit of an Arab over a non-Arab, or of a white over a black person, or of a male over a female.” Religious scholars such as Fatima Mernissi in the Middle East, and Hussein Muhammad in Indonesia, use such scriptures to promote women’s human rights.

Other important women-honoring and -protecting passages in the Koran include the sura on women where men are specifically forbidden from incest with any female relatives of the extended family: “Forbidden onto you are your mothers, and your daughters, and your sisters, and your father’s sisters, and your mother’s sisters, and your brother’s daughters, and your sister’s daughters…” (Koran, 4:23) The Koran gives women the right to separate from an abusive husband: “If a woman feareth ill-treatment from her husband, or desertion, it is no sin for them twain [to separate] if they make terms of peace between themselves. Peace is better… But if they separate, Allah will compensate each out of His abundance.” (Koran, 4:128, 130). Adult men are to care for widows and orphans and not steal their wealth. (Koran, 4:2–10)

Thus the claim is made that Islam gives women great respect, and that it raised the status of Arab women from pre-Islamic days when they were harshly abused as chattel. Yet, one finds in Islam a bias in favor of men, and the continued harsh treatment of women by men.

Men have authority over women because Allah has made the one superior to the other, and because they spend their wealth to maintain them. Good women are obedient… As for those from whom you fear disobedience, admonish them and send them to beds apart and beat them. Then if they obey you, take no further action against them. (Koran, 4:34).

Men’s physical dominance in Islam is compounded by men’s economic dominance: “A male shall inherit twice as much as a female.” (Koran, 4:11) The Koran also enshrines a double sexual standard in that it grants men permission to marry more than one wife, and to divorce easily (Koran, 4:3) while not giving women an equal opportunity to engage in polygamy, or to divorce if they prefer a monogamous marriage. Women’s exclusion from the public sphere is reinforced by a saying in the Hadith, “Those who trust their affairs to a woman will never know prosperity!”

Practices of male supremacy continue to be violently enforced by patriarchal clerics...
and politicians in some regions of Islam. When Khomeini took power in Iran in 1979, feminists were among the first executed. Many improvements in the human rights of women in Iran, won through decades of struggle, were lost—such as access to education (won in 1910), abolition of the veil (1936), the vote (1962), a curb on the absolute male right of divorce (1973), free abortion on demand (1974), and a ban on polygamy and the right to maintenance after divorce (1976). Divorce was permitted to women only on the grounds of medically certified male impotence or sterility (plus a five year waiting period), or desertion. The veil was re-imposed by law, and the punishment for refusing the veil established as 74 lashes. In Bangladesh, fundamentalist Muslim leaders offered a $10,000 reward to anyone killing feminist novelist and poet Taslima Nasrin, who had criticized the fundamentalist aspects of Islam in her book *Lajja* (*Shame*), especially the Shari’a (Muslim laws developed by clerics) for their oppression of women, excused in the name of religion. The government capitulated to the Muslim leaders’ threat of a “holy war,” and charged Nasrin with blasphemy. She has been in hiding since 1994.

The suppression of the Goddess from male, God-centered religion has created further suffering for women. Cultural anthropologist Peggy Reeves Sanday reviewed the anthropological data collected on 156 societies worldwide, and discovered a correlation between exclusive male gods and violence against women. Sanday reports that in societies situated in relatively hostile environments, there emerged an outward focus or external orientation, in tandem with male-dominant social structures, the worship of a primary or exclusive male god(s), and a relatively high incidence of rape and battery. In contrast, in cultures situated in relatively benign and provident environments, a more inward orientation was developed, the social distribution of power was more equal between the sexes, people worshiped a female deity or equal female and male deities as creator gods, and physical abuse and rape were infrequent.

I believe there is a divine nature in the miracles of life which cannot be explained, but which ultimately arises from a Great Mystery which is beyond our fathoming. We give this Great Mystery many names, some of them male, some of them female, some without gender. Whatever helps us connect with and stay connected with the heart of the Mystery, I believe is good. But when ultimate divinity is ascribed to one and only one gender, absolutely, then this is a problem for persons of all genders.

Because male-dominant aspects of religions still persist as a major cultural influence in the world today, and because of their explicit encouragement of domestic violence against women and children, I believe it is profoundly important for peoples of
diverse faiths to call for the protection of women’s and children’s human rights, personal security, and dignity. My own preference is for a religion which reveres one uni-
tive, ineffable All Spirit or Great Mystery which creates, loves, and provides for all. This Mystery may be seen sometimes to manifest as paired and equal creator deities, male and female, Mother and Father.

A society that chooses a gender-balanced religion would likely be one to accord equal respect and sacredness to women and men, girls and boys, both within the domestic as well as the public spheres. My hope is that we can reform the abusive, male-dominant aspects of religions today, and replace them with more benevolent and peaceable, post-patriarchal religions. The need is great for both men and women to reach forward to the place of spiritual liberation as well as economic and political emancipation that moves us socially and spiritually beyond violence, to love.

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PUBLICATIONS CITED


ENDNOTES

1. An early version of this paper was presented at the conference on “Gandhian Responses of Non-violence in a Violent World,” in honor of Gandhi’s 125th birthday, September 28-30, 1994, in Santa Cruz, California. My gratitude to Ellen Boneparth, Emily Stoper, Eahr Joan, Anastasia Prentiss, Kalli Halvorson, and Lucia Birnbaum for helpful editing.


18. Bynner 1944, verse # 25, p. 55; see also # 6, p. 34.


20. Bynner 1944, verse # 52, p. 79; see also # 6, p. 34.


26. Some authors of the hymns of the Vedic Samhitas were women—Visavavara, Sikata Mivavari, and Ghosha; Shah 1992, pp. 20–21; Ghosa (Rig Veda X.39, v. 1–2), Apala (Rig Veda VIII.80, v. 2), and Visavavara (Rig Veda V.28, v. 4) are cited in Leslie 2002, pp. 26–27.

27. My discussion of Hinduism is indebted to Hindu scholars Ronald Epstein, Chandrika Shah, and Kalli Rose Halvorson.


31. Cited in Radhakrishnan and Moore, A Sourcebook in Indian Philosophy, p. 191., in Shah, p. 27.

32. Kalli Rose Halvorson, personal email communication, 2/25/05.


42. Thistlewaite 1989, p. 302.


46. Margaret Smith’s important study, *Muslim Women Mystics: The Life and Work of Rabi’a and Other Women Mystics in Islam*, documents various examples of the higher status of Arab women prior to the rise of Islam.


