

Violence against Women and Children in Religious Scriptures and in the Home

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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.¹ 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.² More than 130 million girls and women have been subjected to female genital cutting.³ Internationally, over one million women and children are trafficked each year for forced labor, domestic servitude, or sexual exploitation.⁴ 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.⁵

In the United States, domestic violence is the leading cause of injury to 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,¹⁷ 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 Tè 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."¹⁸

The Valley Spirit never dies.
It is named the Mysterious Female.
[It] is the base from which Heaven and Earth sprang.¹⁹

The source of life is as a mother. Be fond of both mother and children,
but know the mother dearer, and you outlive death.²⁰

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 you keep your distance, they resent it."²¹ 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

be free of subjugation.” (*Laws of Manu* V.148)³⁰ 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.”³¹ 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.”³²

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...”³³ 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.”³⁴ 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

Falk).³⁷ 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.³⁸

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.³⁹ This pathology erupted most massively during the Middle Ages and early modern age with the torture and burnings by the Catholic and

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."⁴⁴ Religious scholars such as Fatima Mernissi in the Middle East, and Hussein Muhammad in Indonesia, use such scriptures to promote women's human rights.⁴⁵

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 unto 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.⁴⁶ 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!"⁴⁷

Practices of male supremacy continue to be violently enforced by patriarchal clerics

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 unitive, 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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 18. Bynner 1944, verse # 25, p. 55; see also # 6, p. 34.
 19. Waley 1934, p. 149; cited in Parrinder 1980, p. 78.
 20. Bynner 1944, verse # 52, p. 79; see also # 6, p. 34.
 21. Waley 1938; cited in Parrinder, p. 90.
 22. Kelleher 2002, p. 140, cited in *Book of Rites*, ch. 12, in Legge 1967, I: 439.
 23. Kelleher 2002, p. 140, cited in *Book of Rites*, ch. 11, in Legge 1967, I: 439; cited in Sharma 1987, p. 144. See also the 1st century CE Confucian woman scholar Pan Chao, *Women's Precepts*, cited in Parrinder, p. 91.
 24. Zia 2000, pp. 14-16.
 25. <http://www.geohive.com>. 2/22/2005.
 26. Some authors of the hymns of the Vedic *Sambhitas* were women—Visvavara, Sikata Mivavari, and Ghosha; Shah 1992, pp. 20–21; Ghosa (*Rig Veda* X.39, v. 1–2), Apala (*Rig Vega* 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.
 28. Leslie 2002, p. 28-29; *Manusrarti* IX.18; V.155, XI.3, in Leslie 2002, p. 29.
 29. *Laws of Manu* V. 139 in Leslie 2002, p. 30.
 30. Cited in Leslie 2002, p. 30–31.
 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.
 33. Boneparth 2005.
 34. Barnes 1987, p. 106; Peach 1987, pp. 87–99.
 35. Barnes 1987, p. 108.
 36. Walker 1997, pp 21-22.
 37. Marcia Falk 1993; Umansky and Ashton 1992.
 38. King et al. 1978/1990, pp. 523–527; Torjesen 1993.
 39. Sawyer 2002, pp. 215–226.

Carol Z. Rogge

THE RULE OF MARS

READINGS ON THE ORIGINS, HISTORY AND IMPACT OF PATRIARCHY