

Is religion empowering for people, and especially for women? Why/not?

The institution of religion is responsible for the division between people in different parts of the world because any one religion cannot represent everyone's beliefs. There are also too many misconceptions that we have about religions that we do not belong to. For example, too many people believe that Hijabi women are oppressed by the requirement to wear a hijab - whereas to some, the hijab represents the freedom to openly practice their religion. In order for me to avoid expressing my personal biases, I will address the question from my perspective as a young African woman who was raised by Jehovah's Witnesses, in a polytheist country and left the family denomination to join a protestant church.

Christianity promotes "glorified suffering" which keeps oppressed people oppressed because they believe that their suffering shows their commitment to the church. The main reason why Jehovah's Witnesses continue to knock on people's doors to preach the gospel, even though they get insulted and assaulted everyday, is the fact that the same thing happened to Noah. People ridiculed Noah when he told them about the flood that would kill them until they died in the flood. More Christians, especially in poor parts of Africa, believe that they are exactly where God intended for them to be and therefore, do not try and improve their living conditions because Jesus also suffered on Earth and ended up in heaven. They believe that they are not of the world and therefore should not bother improving their lives because they seek a higher ending - that of going to heaven. Both these instances show groups of people who are living in unfavourable conditions but continue living like this because Biblical heroes lived similarly. They glorify suffering thus stay under oppressive situations because of how they interpret religion or just how it has been taught to them. In these instances, religion is, in no way, empowering.

Historically, religion has continuously been used to oppress people and continues to be a medium of oppression for different groups of people in different parts of the world. Christian missionaries were one of the first people to colonise African nations by coming in as people to teach about Jesus - a saviour for all- but inherently started ill treating Africans and seizing their land and resources - leaving Africa in the state she is in today. Similarly, muslims were one of the first people to bring in a different kind of slavery from servitude but also one that was less dangerous compared to transatlantic slave trade, they got people to work in their farms under the impression that they were teaching them Islam. This is why North-Africa is dominated by muslims. Today, newly emerging protestant churches are continuously using Christianity to push their ulterior motives. Pastor Timothy Omotoso, for example, was using his church to traffic young girls to keep them as sex slaves- under the impression that that is what God intended and if they reported the sexual assault then God would punish them. Again, in this instance, religion is disempowering.

However, religion seems to favour the most privileged group of individuals, worldwide, the Christian, white man. Firstly, for the most part, Jesus was portrayed as a white male which then set that as the standard for holiness. For this reason, large Religious groups such as the Catholics have the Pope who is powerful across the globe. White men are feared and respected by the church and are very influential.

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Because of white privilege, men of other races and religions (especially islam) are discriminated against. This leaves white men at the top of the hierarchy - the only people who are empowered by religion.

What is more important than being empowered by religion, is one's relationship with a higher power and the sense of belonging and community- which religion brings for many people. Most African women, the highest demographic of Christians, suffer together in the church but they have the support they need in each other and live with the hope that the suffering will be over and joy will take over.

The basics: Give a top 7 (a religiously symbolic number) list of key elements of feminism and religion. Explain through the medium that is most accessible for you. For example, bullet points with 2-5 sentence annotations, or a poetic narrative, a voice performance (submit sound file), original artwork in any medium.

1. Mindful Organisation

Feminism, like religion, is a structure that has to be organised for its functionality. In order for these structures to fulfil their respective purposes and endure the backlash they receive from people, they must share or preach one message. The message has to be mindful of the different structures that it has to challenge and the positions of all those involved - in society.

2. Understanding Privilege

In order for feminism to thrive, we should understand the position of women in relation to men and white men, in particular, because these are the enemies of the progression of the movement. This understanding helps us navigate the word, which is a space that favours white Christian men so this understanding, will help maneuver and spread the message more effectively.

3. Recognising Patriarchy

It is important to recognise patriarchy in both our lives as well as the in religious institutions so that we challenge it head on. If you know the characteristics of your target, then it is easier to fight it. The Bible promotes patriarchy so when practising faith, we should be able to identify material that is harmful to women and minorities and ignore it or change the words into something that will empower the minority groups involved.

4. Religion

Religion is a very tricky aspect of feminism because on one hand, it promotes unity, community and gives people from different backgrounds and spheres of life, a sense of belonging - just as feminism aims to do. On the other hand, religion constantly tries to define "the place of a woman" in society- which feminism tries to break down.

5. Intersectionality

Feminism must seek to understand the different factors that build people - race, sexuality, age, religio to name a few. This must be considered in order to understand different perspectives in terms of needs thus identifying solutions to different issues faced by different people. Feminism can never assume that people are homogenous, therefore must cater to people's differences and understand intersectionality.

6. Challenging the Norm

Patriarchy and misogyny have, unfortunately, been seen as a norm in many societies and as a result, feminists must work to deconstruct this by challenging the norm and always asking why. This goes beyond feminism, the will to question and challenge ideas is carried onto religion as well because religious norms are

set as the moral compass for many societies. Therefore, challenging the stances, strengthens feminism.

7. Love

Religion, especially Christianity, promotes love which feminism cannot function without. The love for others should be the foundation for both feminism and religion.

Is there something fundamentally flawed about humans? If yes, how do we go about fixing it? If yes or no, how do feminist theory and feminist forms of religion address the flaw and/or human nature?

The question of whether or not humans are flawed has been the foundation of many debates that I have found myself because what I was taught and what I have learned are different so this is an internal battle for me. My first instinct is to say that humans are flawed because we were created out of love but we are failing to spread that love but also, we have Adam and Eve to blame for all the problems the world faces so is the absence of love something that we can blame them for? Because our Creator is above all things, there is a high possibility to fix the human flaw but our differences as humans, might be a barrier.

Our first and biggest flaw as humans is that we have become very self-centered and we love ourselves more than we love others. Wendy Farley's definition of Wisdom is that Wisdom is love. Because we are all born in Wisdom's image, we have the duty to practice and share love - especially extend it to non-believers and minorities. However, it has become human instinct to put ourselves before everyone else, forgetting that Jesus put his life on the line for us and therefore we should be able to make sacrifices for the sake of others. Nowadays, people cannot genuinely do good for others (do charity work) without expecting anything in return. We do charity work with cameras all around us so that we get publicity and make donations to different organisations so that we pay less in taxes or get more tax returns. Helping others is rarely just out of the goodness of our hearts - self gratification is not enough of a reward for many of us anymore. Humans fail to understand the complexity of being human thus we tend to ignore the intersectionality of many - especially those who live lives that we do not understand. There are still too many Christians who condemn homosexuality, even though the power of judgement is not in our hands. Therefore, there is hate speech towards homosexual people and many churches close their doors to members of the LGBTQ+ community even though Jesus preached love for all. This is the first sin, failure to love our neighbours as ourselves.

The failure to acknowledge syncretism of Christianity has highlighted the imperfection of the human race, especially Christians. There is no pure form of Christianity and the different religions and denominations show this but the attitudes that we have towards people whose beliefs and opinions differ from ours shows the imperfections that we possess. In Swaziland, people who practice the Swaziland Traditional Religion - which is based on the same message of the Trinity which many churches are based off- are discriminated against because they use "traditional rituals" to worship instead of the Western rituals that missionaries brought to us. The failure to be mindful of other people with different stances and opinions of worship and just generally doing things is a human flaw. We are quick to point out our differences and dwell on them when we were all created in the same image of love that our Creator possesses. We spend time that we should be using to praise our creator to compete with each other.

However, there is a notion that the flaw that we possess is sin, which we inherited from Adam and Eve which is unfair. Firstly, we preach about God and how

God forgives our shortcomings but the same God could not forgive Adam and Eve so how do we know that God will forgive us? Secondly, Jesus apparently died in order to save us from this sin and if this is the case, then how come we still live under the fear of this inherited sin that Jesus already paid for? Suffering was meant for Jesus and not us, who came after Him so we all need to move from the mentality that the ultimate human flaw is sin because Jesus died to free us from that.

The overruling answer to the question of how to fix the human flaw is simple, love. There is no other way to deal with our flaws because we were created in the image of love. Our flaws come from the failure to practice or show love to others. Returning to love is the only way to avoid a sin because at the end of the day God's decision to send Jesus to die for us was taken out of love. Essentially, we are not flawed but we have the shortcoming of not loving our neighbors as ourselves.

Are there clear and normative criteria for assessing/measuring religious claims? Why/not? And how do you come to that conclusion? Who benefits from your position?

When it comes to religious claims, each person and domination has different interpretations of the same thing. This results in the different opinions that we have when it comes to these claims and different truths as far as these are concerned. However, there are criteria that could be used to assess whether or not these claims are viable, as long as they promote equality - because we were all created in His image and love for all - because we were all created out of love. However, God is non-syncretic so this may be difficult to stick to these criteria.

First, we must all realise that God or any higher power is love and every message taught about them should be based on love for all. This means that the first thing to consider when looking into religious claims is to see whether it promotes love and equality which are the basics of religion. If a claim seeks to exclude certain groups or promote hate towards a group then it is probably not the most sound claim. Most religious heroes and leaders of the past sought to include all people, especially those marginalised by society so interpretations that exclude certain groups cannot be right. Minorities and those marginalised benefit the most from this because they are inspired and drawn into religions that seek to include them so this improves their relationship with the higher powers. Christians believe that "blessed is the hand that giveth" therefore by sharing love and treating others equally, you also get blessings from God. This benefits everyone, in the end.

Secondly, religious claims should be historically sound so that we can back them up factually. Many religions tend to close off personal reflection of what they teach. For example, what Jehovah's Witnesses teach is not open for personal interpretation and does not require one to reflect on the teachings but instead one is expected to take what they are taught about God the way it is taught. This means that there is no way for them to investigate whether or not what they have to say is geographically or historically factual. This results in the Bible being read literally, and inhibits people asking important questions that must be asked when reading a historical text like, "who wrote the text, why and whose story are they telling?" These questions are important because you get to remove bias when you read and actually create your own interpretation of what you read.

However, God is not syncretic and shows up in different forms to different people therefore God is open for personal interpretation. One cannot simply say what people should believe when it comes to religious claims because we all have different experiences with a higher power, from which we derive our beliefs therefore criteria cannot be created for everyone but one can only come up with personal criteria to assess what they will believe as far as religion is concerned. What is important is that you reflect on your truth and your beliefs so that you are not easily deceived by religious claims.

The biggest takeaway from the feminist theology class is that religion and faith are personal journeys and one cannot dictate what one person should believe because we all have different ways of interacting with religion and religious texts. There is no

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single form of God thus religion works in a similar way therefore overall, one cannot measure religious claims for everyone but the messages of love and equality as well as historical soundness of your beliefs should inspire your interpretation of religious claims.