



The Status of Women in Christianity and Buddhism

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Abstract. This article will focus on the position of women in both Christianity and Buddhism, as well as the differences between them. Setting the time frame to the origination period of both religions all the way to modern society. The evaluation will be done through a series of comparisons as well as the act of examining the cultural background, real-life cases, religious activities, and central beliefs of Christianity and Buddhism. The role and importance of women will be explored in two religions through a historical background, including the status/position of women in society's development (if any), as well as partially interviewing qualified individuals working in their respective religious domains.

Keywords: Christianity; Buddhism; Gender Equality

1 Introduction

Christianity and Buddhism are two of the most extensively followed religions worldwide, actively playing paramount roles in the daily lives of a vast number of people^[1]. With an approximate number of 2.6 billion followers in the middle of 2023, Christianity itself is the belief derived from the life, teachings, and death of Jesus Christ of Nazareth. On the other hand, the Indian-originated religion of Buddhism, with followers estimated from 500 million to one billion, holds the central belief that every single being has a Buddha nature, referring to a potential to achieve enlightenment, or professionally called "nirvana". The substantial population of both Christianity and Buddhism makes the task of distinguishing the two religions from a surface level not entirely difficult. However, beyond the surface difference that Christianity is at its core monotheistic, while Buddhism is generally non-theistic, the roles that women play (more often examined through females) in these two religions have long been a subject of public debate.

Casting aside religious beliefs, women throughout history have encountered uncountable hurdles throughout various cultures, this has been manifested in a vast amount of intellectual and physical areas including religious organizations. With that being said, women in both Buddhism and Christianity have faced barriers from a patriarchal society. Thankfully, helpful modern feminist movements along with positive societal factors have aided women, not just in the field of religion, to gain rights and opportunities. However, this does not invalidate the fact that issues regarding certain

inequality still exist. By looking at the standard list of history's most influential religious leaders like Muhammad, Moses, or Abraham, we notice the pattern that these figures tend to be predominantly, or even exclusively male. This, of course, could be reasonably explained, or excused, through a cultural context. However, in the religious practices of modern society, there are still some noticeable phenomena that may contradict some core doctrines of their respective beliefs. Through a means of comparison, by simply examining the activities between Christianity and Buddhism on a surface level, it seems that women in the former religious group are more active than those in the latter. By comparing and simply examining the activities of Christianity and Buddhism on the surface, it seems that women in the former religious group are more active than those in the latter. With these being said, this article's aim is not to criticize or point out negative traits of Buddhism or Christianity, but rather analyze the role of women, as well as their situation/status in religious areas by means of analyzing the religion's core belief, cultural factors, and gender roles. Moreover, by combining information from different sources, we can also make a comparison of the differences in gender roles between Christianity and Buddhism.

2 Gender Role in Christianity: a Christian Perspective on Gender Equality

2.1 Gender Role in Christianity

The core teaching of Christianity is the belief in God the Father, Jesus Christ the Son of God/savior of humanity, and the Holy Spirit. The narrative of the Bible focuses on the relationship between God and humanity, extending knowledge from the beginning, known as Genesis, to the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, ending with a glimpse into an eternal future. In the Bible, God is presented as an omnipresent father-figure being who is always excited. As God is omnipresent, he is omnibenevolent (all-loving), omniscient (all-knowing), and omnipotent (all-powerful), he bears unconditional love for every living individual and is in himself the very definition of love. It is believed that the universal love that God bears for everyone is equal – indicating an aspect of equality for all people regardless of their backgrounds, which includes the consideration of gender.

Gender equality has hinted at its basis in the Bible from all the way to the creation story. In the story, believers see that males and females were both created in the image of God. Genesis 1:27 states, "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God him, male and female he created them." Then later in Genesis 1:28, God gave men and women equal tasks and the purpose of ruling and subduing all creatures "Be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it...every living thing that moves upon the earth. Furthermore, it is stated in the Bible that women and men are both complemen"tary to and different from one another only through divine design.

On the bright side, the importance of women in Christianity can be affirmed through various courses of events throughout the Bible. Historically, Christianity has also made a positive contribution to the female gender status. For instance, although the Bible

does not contain any serious condemnation of the matter, the act of polygamy is outlawed by the religion. A survey conducted in 2020 has estimated that the female share of the international Christian population is at around 51.6%, making there more Christian women than men. Sainthood is also equally open to both women and men. In the Bible for example, the Virgin Mary, who was the mother of Jesus, is the queen of all Saints, earning a significant role in Christianity from the standpoint of a woman. In the Old Testament, several women have played important leadership roles. Women like Esther, who took on multiple roles such as a queen, a wife, and a delivery of her people, presenting a powerful female figure who exhibited honorable Christian leadership qualities. Furthermore, in the New Testament, it is also worth pointing out that the attitude Jesus Christ bears toward women indicates a certain rejection of the notion of female inferiority. In addition to women's contribution to the Bible, women were also the first messengers of Christ's resurrection for the apostles themselves. In this context, it was Mary Magdalene along with the holy women who went to finish anointing the body of Jesus and encountered the Risen One before anyone else.

However, taking things into a cultural context by examining details, the perception of differentiating gender roles and female inferiority can still be recognized. For instance, during the Middle Ages of Christianity (approximately between the 5th-15th centuries), women living under the Patriarchy were generally viewed as the inferior group. Women who practiced Christianity were also not able to escape from this fate. During the Middle Ages period, communities mainly composed of women were highly distinguishable from that of men. Lisa Bitel from Christianity Today explained that: "Women's communities were normally much smaller and poorer. The nuns had to do everything themselves unless they had a couple of tenant farmers to supply food, or pious relatives who made donations." While this is the situation for Christian females back in the day, monastic communities of men experienced things on a much different scale. Instead of facing the need of carrying various burdens by themselves, men usually had many servants, assistants, or even women volunteers without their organizations. However, it can be taken into account that this phenomenon is not exclusive to Christian women, but rather one that is predominately experienced by all women back in the day. In addition, critics of gender issues have made claims upon the monotheistic religion, explaining as Christianity is based on patriarchal understanding, women's inferiority can still be evident in multiple parts of the Bible. By just examining the book by itself, the Bible was written by a group of male church fathers under the conditions of an age that was not entirely bright for women. The stories were told to the people of that age, with their limited knowledge level, from a simplistic standpoint that they could understand. Although corrections have been made as society progressed, the value of women in society back in the olden days was significantly lowered with the emphasis on a concept in which it was said that man was created prior to women. The way the story of creation was spread by the general public set off a long history of humiliation for women that legitimized their obedience and strengthened the patriarchal worldview that can still be taken into account in cultures around the world today. "Man does not belong to a woman, but woman belongs to man, woman was created for man, but man was not created for woman." (Corinthians 11:9).

2.2 Gender role in Modern Society

“Men and women are equal, yet sometimes have different roles.” As mentioned earlier. The core teaching of Christianity is centered around humanity’s relationship with God, not men’s or women’s. The core teaching principle focuses on the morality and spiritual awareness of an individual, and these traits do not differ for any specific gender. Men and women have the same possibility of salvation. However, Christianity highlights the fact that while men and women are equal, they sometimes have different roles. For example, while women can take on the divine journey of motherhood, men usually have access to becoming a priest. This is not considered a form in which God discriminates or takes prejudice against. Rather, it is a reminder to believers that they should embrace their blessings.

Taking a broad view of Christianity in modern society, women are seen as equal, if not more active than their male counterparts. Women can often be seen taking on contributory jobs to the religions such as nuns or youth pastors. Research done by professionals has even found that Christian women have appeared to be more religious than Christian men. In the article *“Why are more women active in the Christian church than men?”* by OUPblog, they have shared that: “In the context of patriarchal societies, Christianity may therefore appeal to women because of its masculine bias, rather than in spite of it. Christianity may have much to offer women who wish to turn their backs on power and embrace the virtues of love, humility, powerlessness, and self-sacrifice.”

It can also be taken into account that as Christianity is a largely Western religion, the development of modern society and consistent feminist activities have influenced Christian’s perspectives on the issue of gender in a positive way without alteration of their moral beliefs. In today’s age, if you attend a church activity, the ratio of female participants to male participants can nearly be taken into equal balance^[2]. Christian activities thereby also do not restrict participation based on anyone’s gender, as men and women are equal in their standing before God as far as salvation, they are also equal in their rights to participate in the religious activities that bound them to their relationship with God.

3 Gender Role in Buddhism

3.1 Gender Role in Early Buddhism

Buddhism has some ‘discrimination’ against women. It’s hard for woman to become Buddhas, and initially, women who wanted to join in the religion had to follow additional rules^[3]. Do these phenomena contradict the Buddhist idea that all beings are equal? It all starts with the origin of the Buddhism. In the 5th and 6th centuries BC, Sakyamuni established Buddhism when the caste system was prevailing in India. In the Laws of Manu, women are dominated by their fathers and husbands. In that highly patriarchal era, early Buddhism, in order to gain acceptance from society and ensure the continuity of the religion, generally favored men. As the Buddhist saying goes, “Women are the embodiment of evil.”

Sakyamuni did not accept female's renunciation at first. When his adoptive mother Mahapajaphakti led five hundred Shakya women to ask to become monks with him, he rejected them three times. Then, to show their determination, the women cut off their hair and followed the Buddha day and night. Their performance moved venerable Ananda. Finally, with his persuasion, Sakyamuni allowed the women to become monks, and additionally enact "The Eight Garudhammas" for Buddhist nuns to follow. (1. A hundred year-old bhikkhuni should respect a novice bhikkhu. 2. Do not curse bhikkhu, do not slander bhikkhu. 3. A bhikkhuni cannot reveal a bhikkhu's fault, while a bhikkhu can reveal a bhikkhuni's fault. 4. After the initial learning period, one should receive ordination in front of the bhikkhus and bhikshunis. 5. If a bhikkhuni violates the precepts, he must repent in front of the bhikkhus and bhikshunis. 6. Every half month, bhikkhunis need to ask for the abstinence of bhikkhus. 7. During three months of rainy season, bhikkhus and bhikshunis have to live separately, but in close proximity. 8. After the rainy season, bhikshunis are supposed to attend a penitent meeting, with bhikshus as witnesses.) There were three reasons for the Buddha to develop the rules. First, in the early period, monks always vagabonded and didn't have permanent residence, they lived by begging. And it would be harmful for women who are frailer than men. It is also dangerous for women to vagabond. "The Eight Garudhammas" allowed bhikshunis to learn from bhikshu, and urged the men to take care of the women, so we can say that developing the rules is a way to protect bhikshunis. Second, the rules help to maintain the teachings of Buddhist that monks should abstain obscenity and desire. For women's joining may break the teachings. In Ekottara Agama, the Buddha once told Ananda that bhikshu could avoid a lot of sufferings by not socializing with women. For early Buddhism, women are unclean, and let the male monk couldn't focus on spiritual practice. While in my opinion, this view is biased. It may also cause by the patriarchal society that I mentioned before. It always blames problems on women. As the Laws of Manu says, "in the world, it is the nature of women to induce men to fall." The Sutra of Great Renunciation describes the Buddha was impervious to the ultimate temptation of beautiful women, implying Buddha's strong willpower and faithfulness to his faith, so we can see that the true monks can't be impacted by the women's charms. The person who generates lust because of women is not a pure monk.

In Theravada Buddhism, women have five handicaps that they couldn't become Brahma King, Sakka, Demon King, Cakravarti Kings and Buddha. Because in Theravada Buddhism, the women are unclean while the Brahma King is really clean, women have strong lust while the Sakka has no lust, women are weak while the Demon King is strong, women are jealous while the Cakravarti Kings is charitable, women have innumerable troubles while the Buddha comes to a successful issue. We can't deny that some women have those personal traits, but it's unfair for the whole women to be defined like these. Gradually, with the popularity of the Mahayana Buddhism, those saying were doubted, as the Mahayana Buddhism's opener minds.

In the Great Purification Dharma Sutra, both men and women whatever they were before, they have the opportunity to become Buddhas as long as they repent.

3.2 The Transformation of Buddhism Come into China

And when the introduction of Buddhism into China which was in the period of Eastern Han Dynasty that was at the time of the feudal unification. Buddhism gradually blended with Confucianism which prevailed in Chinese natively to some extent. And with the influence of Confucianism's feudal ethical code, the Buddhism in China is more likely to discriminate against women. For example, there was a Confucianism's theory called principle of feudal moral conduct. In the theory, the king is the example of the minister, the father is the example of the son, and the husband is the example of the wife.

Buddhism has always kept up with the time^[4]. Its attitude toward women is always related by the society's degree of opening. Like the Tang dynasty, the open and inclusive society made Buddhism more tolerant of women. The Buddhist women in Tang dynasty were allowed to worship male monks as teachers, and they could also join in Buddhist seminar in society. Now, with the gradual awakening of female consciousness, Buddhism does not discriminate between male and female believers.

Actually, in Buddhism, everything is out of phase, let alone male and female (According to the Chaori Ming Samadhi Sutra). Buddhism is essentially non-discriminatory toward women. Just because there were a lot of objective factors, the ordinary people feel that Buddhism has a bias against women^{[5][6]}. It is truly related to most women's physical traits. More importantly, it is closely related to the society and the age.

4 Summary

All in all, the Buddhism and the Christianity both advocate gender equality in essence. And we can see that Buddhism tends to let men teach women, while Christianity prefers to divide the labor between men and women. However, in the special social background (patriarchal society), there were some differentiated treatments between men and women (like women are the appendages of men). And now, with the development of world's feminism, religions are becoming more equal to men and women in every respect.

The two religions could also show the characteristics of two different civilizations. They both claim the equality between men and women, but for different reasons. Christianity mainly focuses on the relationship between the God and humankind, so that it's no need for it to be discriminatory as both men and women are humankind. God is in every follower's heart, and it reflects the concept of "being the hero in your own heart" in Western Maritime Civilization. While the Buddhism advocates gender equality because it believes that everything is equal. What's more, Mahayana Buddhism regards the salvation of all sentient beings as its ultimate goal. These ideas are a microcosm of the Eastern civilization, encouraging individuals to become heroes for their nations and countries.

All the differences have to do with the different ages and places of the two religions. In my opinion, nowadays, all religions have to give up the prejudice against women in the previous patriarchal society and fully implement gender equality to allow religions to alive meaningfully in the new age.

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