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Course Paper

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Gender Inequality in Religion

Even though women make up half of the population, they have faced various forms of discrimination over time. In the realm of religion, women are hardly seen as completely equal to men. Over time, the rules and restrictions placed on women have loosened in some cases, but in others men are still highly favored for leadership positions. In many countries, women are seen as property to men and essentially have no political or personal voice. The way women are treated today depends on culture and the willingness of society as a whole to adapt a more progressive mindset, in which women are equals instead of subordinates. Feminist movements in America have been making moves towards equality to men and some of this can be seen in religion. In today's society, men and women should be considered equals in the realm of religion. The cultural values associated with religions such as Christianity, Judaism and Islam demonstrate varying levels of equality between the sexes.

Feminism has evolved since it first began, from seeking to grant women the right to vote and the right to an education, to where it is now, "fighting for women's rights and interests, to raise their consciousness, work toward their sexual liberation, put an end to gender discrimination, question the power relations between the sexes and completely change the social structures on which they are based" (Las and Ruth 10). While many

men may see feminism as an attack on the male population, categorizing feminists as “men-haters”, it should be seen more as a chance for women to seek out their full potential without being hindered by perceptions of the gender as weak, homemakers or under the control of the man. Women still make less money than men, as evidenced by the wage gap, hold fewer leadership positions, and are more likely to feel pressured to put their career second to starting a family and raising children. While the various waves of the feminist movement have made great strides toward creating more harmonious and balanced gender ideals, there is still a long way to go for society at large and in the context of many religious practices.

Christianity is the largest religion in United States and in the world, with billions of followers in numerous different countries. With many different sects, it would be expected that there is much variation in organization and practice of Christianity throughout the world. However, the book from which the religion is based is the same: the Bible. Likewise, the story of the creation of human life is much the same no matter which particular section of Christianity people may file themselves under. The story follows as such. God created the cosmos and humanity, starting with the first humans, Adam and Eve. Now, instead of creating two equal and independent beings, it is supposed that Eve was actually created from one of Adam ribs. This is symbolic of the fact that a woman is viewed as a piece of a man rather than a stand-alone individual in her own right. In the Book of Genesis when God finds out that both Adam and Eve listened to the serpent and ate the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, he punishes everyone involved: Adam, Eve and the serpent. It was not enough, however,

for Eve to receive the single punishment of painful childbirth, but she was also condemned to be under the control of man. I wonder if it was really the case that God intended for men to control women, or if in the recording of this event, the author of the first 11 chapters, be it Adam or Moses or some other person we don't of, let his own thoughts influence the scripture. In verse 4:19 in the book of Genesis, Cain takes two wives, an unthinkable act if a woman were to try and do the same thing. In Leviticus, the third book of the bible, chapter 15 discusses purity rules for menstruation and says that women are unclean during the period of 7 days. There are numerous other examples of the ways in which the bible construes women as the subservient sex, and it is not difficult to see how people who adhere to this religion in any form may subconsciously or consciously adopt these sexist stereotypes.

Judaism is a much smaller religion than Christianity, with its number of adherents in the millions. However, Judaism is well known everywhere for being the target of the worst genocide that the world has ever seen. Just like many people remember Judaism for this tragedy alone, feminist activists are usually remembered for their most radical actions or ideas, as is the case with the generalizations of many minorities and religions here in America; we tend to remember things that stand out, especially those which are negative. Judaism as a whole is so much more than the tragedy it has undergone and the discrimination it's followers have faced throughout history, but like Christianity, it is not without its flaws. Judaism, too, derives much of its scriptures from what Christianity calls the Old Testament and what Judaism calls the Torah. Halakhah is narrowly defined as Jewish Law and it denotes many principles of Judaism. However, Halakhah is not

“simply a collection of laws. It is a way of life or, more correctly, a way of living. For a Jew, a life directed by Halakhah is as near perfect a way of life as possible” (Greenberg 43). Even this document, that supposedly lends itself to living a perfect life in the Jewish world, stratifies the sexes into a hierarchy rather than classifying men and women as equals in Jewish life and rituals. A prime example of Jewish inequality in the status of women to that of men is found in Jewish divorce law, which requires that “a husband write and deliver a get (bill of divorce) to his wife in order for the marriage to be terminated” (Greenberg 6). In short, a woman is completely dependent upon whether or not her husband wishes to end the marriage, and she cannot continue with the divorce process if her husband is not in agreement. While it is not completely absurd to assume a few role divisions based on slight differences between the sexes, the notion that God intended for superiority doesn't seem in keeping with a God who loves all of his creatures equally. “Could it be that God...prefers and esteems the devotion of one whole class more than another?” (Greenberg 45). In light of the new views of women as equals, in modern Judaism “women may be encouraged to see themselves as equals in social, economic, and political spheres” but not in the religious ones (Greenberg 42). It is time for the Halakhah to be reinterpreted in order to grant women equal rights as human beings in the social, as well as the spiritual world.

Islam faces a lot of criticism in the media for the oppression that Muslim women face. However, as with Christianity, there are many different types of Islam and the practice of the religion varies considerably by country. One of the most well known issues in the infringement of women's rights is the Islamic practice of arranged, or

essentially forced, marriages. While generally less accepted in today's day and age, and even illegal in many countries, it does still occur on a wide scale and it represents a very significant limitation on a woman to restrict her choice in whom she is going to start a life with. In some places, forced marriages continue to occur "as a way to conserve and strengthen bonds between families" (van Doorn-Harder 248). Furthermore, the stripping of the right to individual choice of partner says nothing of the continued disadvantage a woman faces once in the marriage. To note a few examples, a woman has less freedom to get a divorce, similar to Judaism, and it is acceptable for men but not women to take other spouses and for men to view their wives as possessions rather than human beings (van Doorn-Harder 247). It is fundamentally unjust that women are systematically discriminated against in such a pivotal area of their lives. Their male counterparts view women that try to make moves towards equality negatively. "Indonesian men still consider active and educated women as a threat; men feel that women should stay under them" (van Doorn-Harder 152). I would say that this is true not only in Islam, but in many cultures around the world. Men have so long held the power in society that they feel threatened by women's increasing ability to assert their rights and independence. Despite this belief of some Indonesian men, Indonesia is one of the more progressive Islamic countries that seek to give women a more equal role in society. However, in many other Islamic countries "especially those in the Middle East, Islamic resurgence often means reducing women's roles to the domestic sphere" (van Doorn-Harder 30). This evidences a clear step backward from current standards of living for a 21st century woman. Like Christianity and Judaism, Islam is making slow and steady moves toward

granting women the honor and dignity they deserve as equal members of the human species.

Many brave individuals have been at the forefront of women's issues since the movement to speak up first arose. One such women's rights reformer was Elizabeth Cady Stanton. "There is no use in saying what people are ready to hear!" was one of her fondest declarations, and it speaks not only to the heart of women's general social reform movements, but also specifically in the religious realm (Ruether and Keller 294). While some people may be too tied to the ancient hierarchy of men as the principal superiors and women as their auxiliary counterparts, others need to be willing to start shifting away from these primordial beliefs in favor of a more equal view of the sexes.

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