

# God's Glass Ceiling?

BY RUTH A. TUCKER



## Religion's Role in the Repression of Women

*Perhaps it is no wonder that the women were first at the cradle and last at the cross. They had never known a man like this man—there never has been such another. A prophet and teacher who never nagged at them, never flattered them, never treated them as either *The women, God help us!* or *The ladies, God bless them!*; who rebuked without querulousness and praised without condescension; who took their questions and arguments seriously; who never mapped out their sphere for them, never urged them to be feminine or jeered at them for being female; never had an axe to grind and no uneasy male dignity to defend; who took them as he found them and was completely unselfconscious.*

—Dorothy L. Sayers  
*Are Women Human?*

One does not have to read between the lines to quickly recognize that Jesus does not condescend to women. They are all over the pages of the gospels, standing tall alongside their male counterparts, in living color. Like the figures in a colorful kids' pop-up book, nothing will keep them down. They're not hidden behind veils or behind closed doors. Unlike most of the women in the Hebrew Bible who are known primarily as mothers and wives and daughters, these women are prominent in their own right.

Women are disciples of Jesus—in large numbers. And they will one

day inherit eternal life even as will the male disciples. "In the resurrection," Jesus said, "they neither marry nor are given in marriage" (Matthew 22:30, NKJV).

How unlike Mohammad and the Qur'an, where Sura 78 promises

*On couches with linings of brocade shall they recline, and the fruit of the two gardens shall be within easy reach.... Therein shall be the damsels with retiring glances, whom no man...hath touched before them.... In each, the fair, the beautiful*

...these [New Testament] women are prominent in their own right. Women are disciples of Jesus—in large numbers. And they will one day inherit eternal life even as will the male disciples.

"God-fearing" men "a blissful abode, enclosed gardens and vineyards; and [young and beautiful] damsels with swelling breasts."

Again in Sura 55, men are promised a glorious paradise:

*ones...with large, dark eyeballs...whom man hath never touched.*

Where are all the God-fearing Muslim women in Paradise? The virgins who will be pleasuring the men are Allah's new creations.

Some critics of Islam maintain that the inference is that Muslim women go to hell.

Whether or not that is true, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, who was raised a Muslim, insists that life on earth is a virtual hell for millions of Muslim women.

In *The Caged Virgin*, she tells her own story and the story of women who are without standing and protection of the law apart from their husbands or fathers: "The essence of a woman is reduced to her hymen. Her veil functions as a constant reminder to the outside world of this stifling morality that makes Muslim men the owners of women."

### **Female Inferiority—Not Taught by Paul in the New Testament Church**

But before pointing a finger at Islam and other religions, we must look more closely at our own Christian heritage. The Apostle Paul, many biblical scholars argue, restricted women in ministry.

It is true that women were not to teach before they had been taught (1 Timothy 2) and that they were not to interrupt the flow of the discourse in the house-church setting (1 Corinthians 14:34).

But women prayed (albeit with heads covered) and, as in the case of Lydia, apparently led house churches themselves. Numerous female co-workers of Paul are greeted in Romans 16, including Phoebe (a deacon), Junia (numbered among the apostles) and Priscilla (named consistently before her husband).

Paul, however, allowed culture and custom in some cases to dictate the roles of women in both the public and private spheres. He was no first-century feminist. Rather, he was a single-minded missionary who depended on the hard work of others—both women and men.

As the gospel spread and the infant "cult of Jesus" grew, what was once a rag-tag community became more organized and regulated. Even before Christianity became the preferred religion under Emperor Constantine, leaders of the church were seeking to find their

way in the larger pagan world and to define doctrine and practice to the faithful.

### **Female Inferiority—Absolutely Taught by the Early Church**

Tertullian (155-230) was one of many such leaders. He is identified in the *Catholic Encyclopedia* as an "ecclesiastical writer" who served as a priest in Carthage and later became part of the Montanist movement. His various apologetical works are often cited on a wide range of topics, including women's roles and conduct. "The sentence of God on this sex of yours lives in this age," he wrote. "The guilt must of necessity live too. You are the devil's gateway; you are the unsealer of that (forbidden) tree; you are the first deserter of the divine law." Indeed, he just kept piling it on: "You destroyed so easily God's image, man. On account of your desert—that is, death—even the Son of God had to die."

St. Augustine of Hippo, though more nuanced than Tertullian, also viewed the woman as lesser than the man—as did John Chrysostom who held that man was created in the image of God, while wife is the glory of man.

But it would be left to Thomas Aquinas to more fully lay out the matter in philosophical and theological terms. In the *Summa Theologiae* and in other writings he argues that female inferiority is not merely a matter of physical strength but also of intellectual capacity. This he determines on the basis of logic—that if the woman was created for the man (Genesis 2), she therefore must be inferior to the man.

He found support in the writings of Aristotle who had concluded that women served in procreation as merely an incubator for the man's seed. As such she was a passive agent—inferior to the man.

Such conclusions of Aquinas were not only imperceptive but also foolish considering the contributions women had made through-



Augustine of Hippo

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—Tertullian



Thomas Aquinas



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though not in the church hierarchy from priest to Pope. Luther scorned monasticism, and set free monks and nuns (often against their will) where he had political influence. Although one of



vice on into the twentieth century with the rationale that correcting a wife with corporal punishment was comparable to correcting a child.

### Christian Outreach Helped Improve Women's Lives Worldwide

Such abuse, however, was never sanctioned by Jesus or Paul, nor do their sayings and writings justify any practice that would relegate women to an inferior status. This was the message of missionaries who brought the gospel to cultures where women were sometimes considered inferior to cattle or the household dog. Ann Judson, wife of the celebrated missionary Adoniram Judson, wrote to supporters back home in America about Buddhism and life in Burma in the early nineteenth century. She told gripping accounts of Burmese women and described heartrending instances of female infanticide, child marriages and wives abused by the "tyrannic rod" of their husbands: "The wife receives the appellation of *my servant or my dog*, and is allowed to partake of what her lordly husband is pleased to give her at the *conclusion* of his repast."

Daily life was no better for women living under Hindu customs in India. Women's missionary work there and elsewhere focused to a large extent on reform efforts to help raise the status of their sisters in subjection. Edwin Bliss summarizes the situation:

*Not merely the seclusion in the zenana, but the terrible suffering occasioned by the customs of child-marriage, the suttee [widow burning] and the position of widows made their condition almost more pitiable than that of women in Africa or China. It was for them that the first women's societies were organized, and work for them has been from the beginning an integral part of missionary effort.*

As the Christian faith took hold, customs slowly changed. "Before these people became Christians,"

the tenets of Luther's Reformation was the priesthood of all believers, there was no such openness regarding clerical office.

Katie Luther set the stage for the role of minister's wife; and women, such as Katherine Zell, Argula von Stauffer and Rene of Ferrara, made significant contributions to the Protestant cause. But, unlike Catholic women, their roles were not officially sanctioned.

The Anabaptists and other sectarian movements such as the Quakers and Shakers (and even the early Methodists) offered women leading roles, but the same was not true for what could be termed mainstream or institutionalized or magisterial Protestantism. Both Catholics and Protestants simply assumed woman's inferior status—an inferiority that affected both the public and private realms.

A fifteenth-century Dominican friar wrote: "A man may chastise his wife and beat her for correction, for she is his household, therefore the lord may chastise his own." Husbands acted on such ad-

out the generations of church history. Paula was a widely recognized biblical scholar who was frequently referenced by Jerome, known for the Vulgate translation of the Bible; and throughout the Middle Ages monastic women were involved in scholarly pursuits. Thomas Aquinas surely was aware of that, but the bias against women was deeply entrenched.

### Reformation—an End to Teachings About Female Inferiority?

But of course, we easily imagine this all changed with the Protestant Reformation. Not so. Indeed, the case is often made that the Reformation was a setback for women.

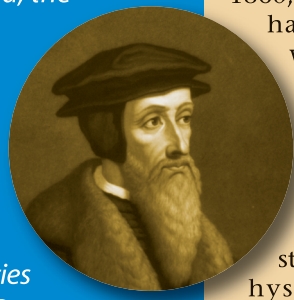
Indeed, Protestant leaders offered no official ministry opportunities for women as the Roman Catholics did. Throughout medieval times, Catholic women—from the novice to the abbess—had performed faithful service in monasticism—

As the Christian faith took hold, customs slowly changed. "Before these people became Christians," wrote an Indian observer, "they bought and sold wives like we buy and sell buffalos."



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wrote an Indian observer, “they bought and sold wives like we buy and sell buffalos. Now they choose one woman and remain faithful to her as long as she lives.” When a group of Indian women were asked how their family lives had changed with Christian teachings, their responses were varied: “They let us have the money we earn.” “They help wives in their work.” “They don’t fight.” “They don’t abuse us in words or actions.” They are kind and pray for us and our children.” “They forgive our faults.”

We cannot assume these women were living in marital bliss, but they universally described their situations as better with the coming of the Christian faith. Male missionaries strongly supported the women’s work their wives were conducting, and they insisted husbands treat their wives with respect, and quoted Paul, to “love them as Christ loves the church.”

**Elizabeth Packard’s Suffering in “Christian” America**

But even as the Women’s Missionary Movement was spreading the gospel overseas, back home Christian women often suffered under the tyrannical rule of their husbands. Elizabeth Packard is a case

in point. Mrs. Packard, a mother of six children, was the wife of the Reverend Theophilus Packard, a Presbyterian minister. As a staunch Calvinist and champion of male headship, Theophilus was incensed by his wife’s religious opinions and was determined to silence her. In 1860, when she was forty-three, he had her declared insane. She was forcibly taken from their home and transported to southern Illinois where she was confined in a state-run insane asylum.

It was the morning of June 18, 1860. Neighbors were stunned and the children were hysterical. But the actions of Theophilus were legally sanctioned: “Illinois law had made him the arbiter of his wife’s mental state, God’s law made him the guardian of her soul. He was committing her to save her soul, to keep her from endangering the souls of their children, and to shield his creed from her criticism.”

His case against her was supported by testimonials. Examining her



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on that fateful morning, Dr. Knott deemed her “partially deranged on religious matters,” though he conceded that “on all other subjects she was perfectly rational.” Dr. Brown determined that “she exhibited no special marks of insanity” on domestic matters, but after discussing with her about her denial of the Calvinist doctrine of total depravity, he declared with confi-

dence that he “had not the slightest difficulty in concluding that she was hopelessly insane.”

Three years later, in June of 1863, through the efforts of her sister and her son, Elizabeth was released and allowed to return home—but not to freedom. Theophilus kept her under house arrest until she was able to escape and sue for divorce. She continued to live in the same home with her husband, but she was now free. She became a political activist, traveling to more than thirty states lobbying for legislative reforms. She also published her memoirs, telling the story that she vowed would live on to help others. On her death in 1897, *The Chicago Tribune* summed up her legacy: “Through the influence of her books, added to her untiring efforts, thirty-four bills have been passed by various legislatures, each benefiting the insane in some way.”

So, even as the gospel was carried forth to “heathen” lands to liberate captive women (and men), women suffered at the hands of their “Christian” husbands back home. Jesus’ words are as appropriate today as they were for Rev. Packard in 1860: “Physician heal thyself.” Truly women have suffered and continue to suffer today in Islam and under the severe restrictions that other religions impose.

But Christian America is not exempt from gender inequities. From rap music and radio-jocks to the “glass ceiling” of corporate enterprise, women encounter insults completely contrary to the gospel message of the One who never nagged or flattered; never mapped out their sphere, never jeered at them; never had an axe to grind and no uneasy male dignity to defend. □

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