

Chapter 03: Religion as a Penis Guard - The Role of Spirituality in Reinforcing Male Superiority and Gender Norms

THE BIBLE OF MALE INFERIORITY

In various cultures, the penis guard has long served as a symbol of masculinity, marking not just physical protection but a broader societal and spiritual defense of male dominance. One notable example is the Dani group of New Guinea, where men wear kotekas—sheaths made from dried gourds—as part of their attire. These guards serve a dual purpose: protecting the male genitalia while also signaling the importance of safeguarding masculinity and power. In essence, the penis guard becomes a symbolic shield for male superiority, reinforcing the societal structures that keep men in control.

This physical object is a powerful metaphor for the role that religion has played throughout history in maintaining patriarchal values. Much like a penis guard, religious institutions and spiritual beliefs have acted as a protective barrier for male dominance, shielding men's control over women and society. From religious hierarchies to sacred texts, religion has been a powerful force in justifying and perpetuating male leadership, while simultaneously restricting female autonomy.

This chapter explores how religion, like the symbolic penis guard, has been deliberately used to reinforce patriarchy. By embedding patriarchal values within spiritual beliefs and practices, religion has upheld societal structures that favor male dominance, while suppressing female empowerment. By examining historical contexts and religious texts, we can uncover how religion has acted as a safeguard for male superiority and continues to influence gender dynamics today.

Historical Context of the Penis Guard

The penis guard, in many ancient and tribal societies, was far more than a practical piece of attire. It became a cultural symbol of masculinity, power, and male dominance. The Dani tribe of New Guinea provides the most well-known example, where men wear kotekas—gourd sheaths to cover their genitals. These were not simply used for modesty or physical protection, but as symbols of male status and masculinity. The size and shape of a man's koteka often denoted his age, role in the tribe, or social standing.

However, the use of the penis guard extended beyond physical protection to embody spiritual meaning. It symbolized male power and the need to safeguard male sexuality—viewed as central to a man's identity and reproductive abilities. The ritual and tradition surrounding the penis guard emphasized its role in a man's transition into adulthood, reinforcing his right to participate fully in the social and spiritual life of the tribe.

Yet, the deeper function of the penis guard wasn't just about protection—it was about control. The koteka symbolized a broader societal effort to protect male authority, reflecting the underlying male insecurity over losing control of resources and women. In this context, the penis guard was a tangible assertion of control over male identity and, by extension, the social hierarchy. It safeguarded not just male reproductive organs but male power, reinforcing the idea that men were the natural leaders, protectors, and providers.

This need to control and maintain male dominance is deeply connected to the broader social and gender dynamics of Papua New Guinea. Even today, it remains one of the most dangerous countries for women, with high rates of domestic violence, sexual abuse, and gender-based discrimination. The cultural frameworks that prioritize male dominance and control, reflected in symbols like the penis guard, have perpetuated a society where women are frequently marginalized and oppressed.

The prevalence of the penis guard and its symbolic significance speaks to the fragility of male power—an insecurity that manifests in violence and the repression of female autonomy. In many patriarchal societies, the more control men exert over women, the more apparent it becomes that male dominance is something that must be constantly guarded and reinforced. The penis guard, therefore, becomes a symbol not just of male physicality, but of the fear of losing control over women, their bodies, and their roles in society.

Religion as a Social Guard for Male Superiority

Just as the penis guard physically and symbolically protected male dominance, religion has served as a social and spiritual guard to protect and uphold patriarchy. Across different cultures and religious systems, male-dominated structures were deliberately created and reinforced to ensure that men remained in positions of power while women were relegated to secondary roles. Religion has often acted as a protective barrier, legitimizing male control over society through divine narratives and spiritual authority.

In many Abrahamic religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—male authority is explicitly embedded in sacred texts and religious traditions. God is often depicted as a patriarchal figure, establishing a clear hierarchy with men at the top. For instance, in the Bible, God creates Adam first, in His own image, and Eve from Adam's rib. This creation narrative, particularly Eve's secondary and dependent status, has been used to justify the subjugation of women for centuries. Eve's role in the Fall of Man—where she succumbs to temptation and leads Adam to eat the forbidden fruit—has further entrenched the idea that women are morally weaker and must be controlled by men.

Similarly, in the Quran, the concept of *Qiwamah* (guardianship) reinforces male authority over women. Men are seen as the protectors and providers, responsible for the well-being of their families. This notion is reinforced through various Hadiths (sayings of the Prophet Muhammad) that outline strict gender roles, ensuring women's subordination in both religious and societal life. These religious structures, which position men as the

natural leaders, are deeply ingrained in many Islamic societies, where women's roles remain limited to domestic and subservient capacities.

In Hinduism, the ancient legal text Manusmriti codifies a strict social order where women are perpetually under male guardianship—first under their fathers, then their husbands, and later their sons. Women's autonomy is constrained within these boundaries, and their value is often tied to their role in preserving family honor. In Hindu mythology, while goddesses are powerful, they often play complementary roles to male gods, reflecting the male-dominated structures in society. The religious and cultural traditions rooted in these texts have long justified the restriction of women's autonomy and independence.

Religious texts and teachings across different cultures not only emphasize male authority but also institutionalize it. In these patriarchal systems, male dominance is justified as divinely ordained, leaving little room for questioning or reform. The spiritual legitimacy of male authority has made these power structures resistant to change, as challenging male dominance often equates to challenging religious doctrine.

Religious institutions, too, have historically excluded women from positions of leadership. For centuries, only men could serve as priests in Christianity, a tradition that continues in many denominations. In Islam, women are not permitted to lead mixed-gender prayers. In Hinduism, women are barred from performing certain religious rituals, particularly during menstruation, as they are considered ritually impure during this time. These institutional practices reinforce the idea that men are spiritually superior and women are inherently inferior.

Religion, therefore, functions much like the symbolic penis guard, shielding male dominance and maintaining patriarchal values through divine justification. By positioning male authority as sacred and unquestionable, religious institutions have played a key role in perpetuating gender inequality. The gatekeepers of religious authority—whether priests, rabbis, imams, or gurus—have ensured that male dominance remains deeply entrenched in societal norms, making it difficult for women to challenge these structures.

Religious Texts and Gender Roles

Religious texts have long been powerful tools in establishing and enforcing rigid gender roles. Across various faiths, scriptures have defined the social and spiritual status of men and women, often placing women in subordinate and submissive positions. These texts not only reflect the patriarchal societies in which they were written but have also been used as justifications for the continued subordination of women, framing it as divine law.

In the Bible, both the Old and New Testaments contain examples of how religious doctrine has been used to establish male authority. The creation story in Genesis, where Eve is made from Adam's rib, has long been

interpreted as a divine endorsement of male superiority. Eve's role in the Original Sin—where she is tempted by the serpent and causes the downfall of humanity—further cemented women's position as secondary and morally weaker beings. Passages such as Ephesians 5:22-24, which calls for wives to "submit to their husbands as to the Lord," reinforce this notion of female submission. Biblical references to women as "weaker vessels" (1 Peter 3:7) have been interpreted by many religious leaders to imply that women are spiritually weaker and in need of male guidance.

In the Quran, gender roles are similarly defined, with men positioned as the guardians of women due to their physical strength and financial responsibility. Surah An-Nisa (4:34) explicitly mentions men as protectors and maintainers of women, which has been widely interpreted as divine endorsement of male authority within the family and society. While the Quran offers protections for women, the interpretation of these texts by male scholars has often focused on justifying male superiority, ensuring women's obedience to their husbands and male guardians.

In Hinduism, the Vedas and other key texts institutionalize gender roles, often placing women in subservient positions. The Manusmriti, one of the most influential legal texts in Hinduism, outlines strict guidelines for female behavior, asserting that women must always be under the guardianship of men. Women are described as inherently weak, in need of constant supervision to maintain social order. The Manusmriti's proclamation that "a woman should never be independent" has been used to justify the systemic oppression of women in many traditional Hindu communities, limiting their autonomy and access to education, leadership, and religious rituals.

Even in Buddhism, which is often seen as more egalitarian, gender roles are distinctly hierarchical. Bhikkhunis (Buddhist nuns) must follow the Eight Garudhammas, a set of rules that reinforce male dominance within the monastic community. These rules require even the most senior nun to show deference to the youngest monk, indicating the secondary status of women in Buddhist monastic life. Furthermore, the belief that being born a woman is a result of bad karma from a previous life has reinforced the idea that women are spiritually inferior to men, contributing to their lower status within Buddhist communities.

Case Studies: Religion as a Tool for Suppressing Female Empowerment

Throughout history, religion has often been used as a mechanism to suppress female empowerment, maintaining male dominance by embedding patriarchal values within religious frameworks. Examining specific case studies across various religions and cultures reveals how these structures have reinforced gender inequality. In contrast, some matriarchal religious systems offer a glimpse into how women's roles could be more empowered and respected.

Abrahamic Religions and Female Subjugation

In the Abrahamic religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—sacred texts and religious practices have consistently positioned women in subordinate roles, reinforcing male authority. In Judaism, strict gender roles are embedded within the religious framework, with traditional practices separating men's and women's religious duties. In many Orthodox Jewish communities, women are barred from serving as rabbis or participating in significant religious rituals, ensuring that men retain control over religious life. The Torah reinforces male dominance by delegating women's roles to the domestic sphere, perpetuating the belief that men should hold religious authority.

In Christianity, the Bible has long served as a foundation for the subjugation of women, particularly through the story of Eve in the Book of Genesis. Eve's transgression in the Garden of Eden has been interpreted as a justification for women's lower status, portraying them as inherently weaker and morally unreliable. This narrative has allowed Christian institutions to deny women leadership positions and religious authority throughout history. Even today, many Christian denominations, such as the Catholic Church, prohibit the ordination of women, maintaining the belief that religious power should be exclusively male.

In Islam, gender inequality is often perpetuated through both Quranic verses and Hadiths (sayings of the Prophet Muhammad), which are interpreted to prioritize male authority. For example, Quran 4:34 allows husbands to discipline their wives, reinforcing male control over female behavior. In many Islamic countries, these interpretations are codified into Sharia law, restricting women's legal rights and autonomy. Countries like Saudi Arabia have historically imposed harsh restrictions on women's freedoms, barring them from driving, working, or traveling without male permission. These laws have been justified through religious interpretations that prioritize male guardianship over women.

Hinduism and the Legacy of Gendered Roles

In Hinduism, the subordination of women is deeply rooted in religious texts, particularly in the Vedas and Manusmriti. While goddesses like Lakshmi and Durga are revered, Hindu social structures have historically emphasized male dominance. The Manusmriti, an influential legal text, relegates women to positions of subservience, outlining a hierarchy that places men in complete control over women. According to the text, a woman must never be independent and must be under the control of her father, husband, or son at all times. This belief system justified practices such as Sati, in which widows were burned on their husbands' funeral pyres, an extreme example of the control exercised over women's bodies and lives.

Modern Hindu societies still reflect these gendered roles through practices like the dowry system and the preference for male children. These customs, rooted in religious tradition, perpetuate gender inequality and suppress women's rights. The systemic oppression of women in Hindu communities continues to be reinforced by religious norms, limiting their ability to break free from these deeply ingrained roles.

Islam and Women's Rights in the Middle East

In many Middle Eastern countries, Islamic law (Sharia) has been used to restrict women's rights, with religious interpretations often serving as the basis for legal systems that control and subjugate women. Countries like Saudi Arabia have long imposed strict restrictions on women's freedoms, including laws that barred women from driving or traveling without male guardianship. Although some recent reforms have begun to lift certain restrictions, the deeply ingrained religious justifications for male dominance remain pervasive.

For example, Quran 4:34, which permits men to discipline their wives, has been a particularly potent tool for maintaining male control in marriage and family life. In many conservative Islamic communities, this verse is interpreted as an endorsement of male authority and is used to justify restrictions on women's freedom of movement, access to education, and employment.

In contrast, some Sufi and Shi'a interpretations of Islam have historically been more inclusive of women, allowing them greater participation in religious and social life. However, the dominance of conservative Sunni traditions, particularly in countries influenced by Wahhabism, has contributed to the entrenchment of patriarchal values within Islamic societies.

Buddhism and Female Subordination in Monastic Life

Although Buddhism is often seen as more egalitarian, women in Buddhist monastic communities have long faced discrimination. In Theravāda Buddhism, practiced in countries like Sri Lanka and Thailand, women are often prohibited from becoming fully ordained nuns. Even the most senior bhikkhuni (nun) must show deference to the youngest bhikkhu (monk), reinforcing the hierarchical structure that places men above women.

Moreover, the belief that being born a woman is the result of bad karma feeds into societal views of women as inferior. Women are often taught that they must obey their husbands and act virtuously to be reborn as men in their next lives. This belief reinforces the notion that male existence is spiritually superior, perpetuating gender inequality within the religious framework.

The Minoan Civilization and Matriarchal Structures

In stark contrast to the patriarchal systems discussed above, the Minoan civilization of ancient Crete provides a rare example of a matriarchal religious structure. The Minoans worshipped powerful goddesses, and women played prominent roles in both religious and social life. Unlike male-dominated systems in Abrahamic or Hindu traditions, Minoan society centered on the worship of female deities, and women were placed in positions of leadership and reverence.

The Mother Goddess was celebrated as the supreme deity, reflecting a worldview where women were seen as vital to the balance of life and society. Women were central figures in religious ceremonies, as depicted in Minoan frescoes, and archaeological evidence suggests that they held significant political power as well. Minoan society was unique in its elevation of women, offering a model for how religion can function in a way that empowers women rather than suppresses them.

This contrast between matriarchal and patriarchal religious systems highlights how differing spiritual ideologies shaped the roles and status of women. While patriarchal systems used religion to justify male dominance, matriarchal societies like the Minoans celebrated femininity and placed women in positions of authority and influence.

Modern Interpretations and Resistance: Challenging Patriarchal Religious Narratives

As the modern feminist movement continues to challenge deeply ingrained patriarchal structures, religion—historically a bastion of male dominance—has increasingly come under scrutiny. The struggle to confront and resist these male-dominated narratives has taken many forms, from reinterpreting religious texts to creating space for women in religious institutions. These efforts have paved the way for progressive religious movements, feminist theologians, and empowered women seeking to reclaim their rightful place within the spiritual realm.

Feminist Challenges to Patriarchal Religious Narratives

Feminist scholars and activists have made significant strides in critiquing the gendered nature of religious narratives and institutions. They argue that much of the oppression women face in religious contexts stems from patriarchal interpretations of sacred texts. Feminist critique focuses on how religious traditions have been written, interpreted, and controlled by men, often to the detriment of women's rights and autonomy.

In Christianity, feminist theologians like Mary Daly and Rosemary Radford Ruether have challenged the gender biases in biblical interpretation. Daly, for example, famously argued that "if God is male, then the male is God," highlighting the problem with a male-centered theology. Feminist scholars have examined the roles of women in early Christian communities, uncovering lost histories of female leadership within the church. These efforts have sparked debates over the ordination of women and the need to dismantle patriarchal structures within Christian institutions.

In Islam, feminist scholars such as Amina Wadud and Asma Barlas have focused on reinterpreting the Quran through a feminist lens. Wadud argues that the Quran's original message emphasizes justice and equality for both genders, but it has been misinterpreted by male scholars to privilege men. In 2005, Wadud led a controversial mixed-gender Friday prayer, defying traditional Islamic practices that prohibit women from

leading prayers for men. This act of defiance was both symbolic and practical, demonstrating how women can reclaim their spiritual leadership within Islam.

Similarly, in Judaism, feminist theologians like Judith Plaskow have worked to reimagine Jewish traditions from a woman's perspective. Plaskow's groundbreaking work, *Standing Again at Sinai*, calls for a reinterpretation of Jewish history and rituals that fully includes women's experiences. She advocates for a Judaism where women can participate fully in religious leadership roles and rituals, challenging the traditional male-dominated structures within Jewish religious life.

Progressive Religious Movements for Gender Equality

In addition to feminist reinterpretations of religious texts, there are progressive religious movements and leaders working to reform their traditions from within. These movements aim to create more inclusive religious communities where women have equal access to leadership and authority.

In Christianity, progressive denominations such as the Episcopal Church and United Church of Christ have embraced the ordination of women, with women now serving as bishops, pastors, and religious leaders. In 2006, Katharine Jefferts Schori became the first female Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, a landmark moment in the fight for gender equality in Christian leadership.

In Islam, the rise of Muslim feminist movements such as Musawah has challenged patriarchal interpretations of Sharia law and gender roles. Founded in 2009, Musawah is a global movement for justice and equality in the Muslim family, advocating for legal reforms and reinterpretations of Islamic teachings to promote gender equity. These movements seek to dismantle cultural and religious norms that have long limited women's rights in Muslim communities.

In Hinduism, movements like Shaktism, which centers on the worship of the divine feminine, provide a platform for women to reclaim spiritual power. Shaktism emphasizes the equality of women and men in the worship of Shakti, the feminine divine force, challenging the male-centered traditions in other branches of Hinduism. Female gurus like Mata Amritanandamayi ("Amma") have garnered massive followings, demonstrating that women can hold significant spiritual authority within Hinduism.

Women Reclaiming Space Within Religious Frameworks

Around the world, women are actively reclaiming spaces within religious institutions that have traditionally been closed to them. From leadership roles to theological reinterpretations, women are steadily carving out their place in religious communities.

In Judaism, the movement for egalitarian prayer has seen a rise in women leading prayers and Torah readings in Orthodox Jewish communities, a significant shift from their traditional exclusion from public religious roles. The organization Women of the Wall has been at the forefront of advocating for women's rights to pray and read from the Torah at the Western Wall in Jerusalem, despite fierce opposition from conservative religious authorities.

In Buddhism, women have fought for the right to full ordination as bhikkhunis (nuns), a practice that had nearly disappeared in many Theravāda Buddhist countries. In Sri Lanka and Thailand, female monastics have led the push for the reinstatement of full ordination, challenging the male-dominated monastic hierarchy. Women like Dhammananda Bhikkhuni in Thailand have become symbols of resilience, breaking through centuries-old barriers and inspiring a new generation of Buddhist women to seek ordination.

In Christianity, the struggle for women's ordination continues in denominations like the Catholic Church. Groups such as Women's Ordination Worldwide are actively campaigning for the inclusion of women in the priesthood, challenging the Vatican's longstanding ban on female clergy. These women argue that denying women ordination violates the equality that Jesus preached and call for a reinterpretation of biblical texts that have historically justified the exclusion of women from religious leadership.

In Islam, women are reclaiming their space in mosques, leading prayers, and engaging in religious scholarship. Sherin Khankan, Europe's first female imam, founded the Mariam Mosque in Copenhagen, which is led by women and welcomes both male and female congregants. This initiative represents a radical shift in the traditional gender dynamics of Islamic worship, showing that women can lead prayers and religious communities without undermining Islamic principles.

Conclusion

Religion, much like the ancient penis guard, has historically functioned as both a symbolic and practical tool to secure male dominance and reinforce patriarchal values. From the codification of gender roles in religious texts to the establishment of male-dominated religious hierarchies, religion has been used as a social mechanism to maintain control over women's bodies, sexuality, and agency. Across various cultures and religious traditions, the subordination of women has been justified through divine authority, further entrenching male superiority and limiting women's freedom.

However, the ongoing struggle to dismantle these structures continues in modern society. Feminist movements, progressive religious leaders, and scholars are challenging the gendered interpretations of sacred texts and advocating for more inclusive religious practices. These efforts highlight the need to critically examine how religion has historically been used to marginalize women and to question the cultural, social, and spiritual norms that sustain these inequalities.

Fostering gender equality requires a collective rethinking and reinterpretation of religious traditions. By uncovering the lost histories of female leadership, challenging patriarchal interpretations of religious texts, and creating inclusive spaces within religious institutions, we can begin to break down the barriers that have held women back for centuries. As society evolves, so too must our understanding of religion, ensuring that it no longer serves as a guard for male superiority but becomes a force for justice, equality, and empowerment for all genders.