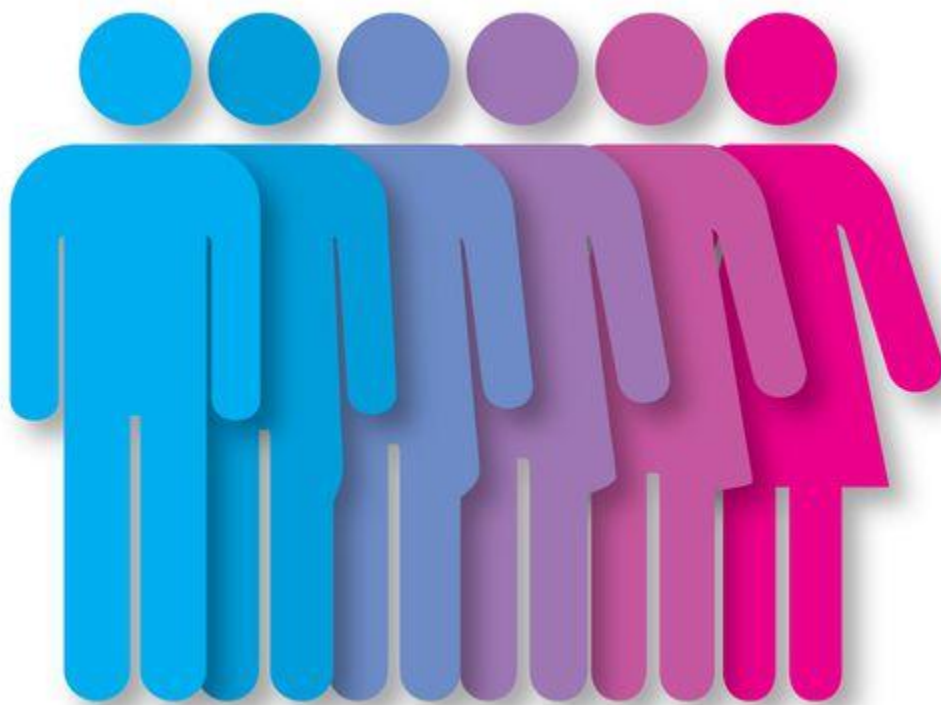


OCR

A Level Religious Studies

Gender



Name:

Introduction

Christianity has had a turbulent history when it comes to its treatment of women. Arguably, the earliest Christians were more inclusive of women than some Christian denominations now. This had led to controversial discussion about family life, motherhood, and the roles of women in society and in families that do not have a mother and father as the adults.

Some Christians do all they can to maintain the view of gender and family that is portrayed in the Bible. They might do this because they come from Christian backgrounds that view the Bible as authoritative for modern life; alternatively, they might refer to the order of creation and other evidence that this is the 'natural' way to be.

However, other Christians would view this as a root of many of the problems in the Church – Jesus did not approve of oppression, but this approach oppresses different groups of people.

It can be argued that Christians should adapt to society so that it can speak to young people and future generations; however, if God has established a true order of society, perhaps Christians should not bow to moral relativism. The fast-paced change to society, especially in the West, is challenging Christianity to examine its identity and its mission.



What you need to know:

Topic	Content	Key Knowledge
Gender and Society	<i>The effects of changing views of gender and gender roles on Christian thought and practice, including:</i>	
	- Christian teaching on the	Including reference to: - Ephesians 5:22-33

	<i>roles of men and women in the family and in society</i>	- <i>Mulieris Dignitatem 18-19</i>
	- <i>Christian responses to contemporary secular views about the roles of men and women in the family and in society</i>	<i>The ways in which Christians have adapted and challenged changing attitudes to family and gender, including issues of:</i> - <i>Motherhood/parenthood</i> - <i>Different types of family</i>
	<i>Learners should have the opportunity to discuss issues related to Christian responses to changing views of gender and gender roles, including:</i> • <i>Whether or not official Christian teaching should resist current secular views of gender</i> • <i>Whether or not secular views of gender equality have undermined Christian gender roles</i> • <i>Whether or not motherhood is liberating or restricting</i> • <i>Whether or not the idea of family is entirely culturally determined</i>	
Gender and Theology	<i>The reinterpretation of God by feminist theologians, including:</i> - <i>the teaching of Rosemary Radford Ruether and Mary Daly on gender and its implications for the Christian idea of God</i>	Ruether's discussion of the maleness of Christ and its implications for salvation, including: - Jesus' challenge to the male warrior – messiah expectation - God as the female wisdom principle - Jesus as the incarnation of wisdom Daley's claim that 'if God is male then male is God' and its implications for Christianity, including: - Christianity's 'Unholy Trinity' of rape, genocide and war

		- Spiritually experienced through nature
	Learners should have the opportunity to discuss issues related to God, gender and feminist theology, including: • A comparison of Ruether's and Daley's feminist theologies - Sexism of patriarchy in Christianity, as it has developed in the mainstream Churches - Whether Christianity can be changed or should be abandoned • Whether or not Christianity is essentially sexist • Whether or not a male saviour can save women • Whether or not only women can develop genuine spirituality • Whether or not the Christian God can be presented in female terms	

Key Words

Patriarchy – Male-dominated, a patriarchal society is one where men have more power than women.

Spirituality – Being concerned with the deepest questions of life; being open to the divine



Background:



Paradoxically, Christianity presents itself as a prophetic movement of liberation and belief in a new heaven and a new earth redeemed by the faithful. Mary Daly and Daphne Hampson are post-Christian feminists who reject the very basis of Christianity and the Christian God-concept. Rosemary Ruether remains a Catholic, calling the Church to repent and change.

However, Christianity isn't one entity and it is dangerous to generalise. The Montanists of the second

to sixth century had women leaders and prophets, and the Quakers of the past 400 years have always followed a preist-less equality where anyone can speak a word from God. Perhaps Christianity (following Emperor Constantine's conversion in 316) has become too enmeshed in the power structures of many societies to be a prophetic movement and has become a reflection of the slow progress of its times.

Hermeneutics of Suspicion

Paul Ricoeur (1913-2005) asks us to adopt a hermeneutic of suspicion when reading a text such as the Bible. We need to be suspicious of the motives, the values, the culture of those who wrote it, and not just project our own values onto the text.

James O'Donnell comments:

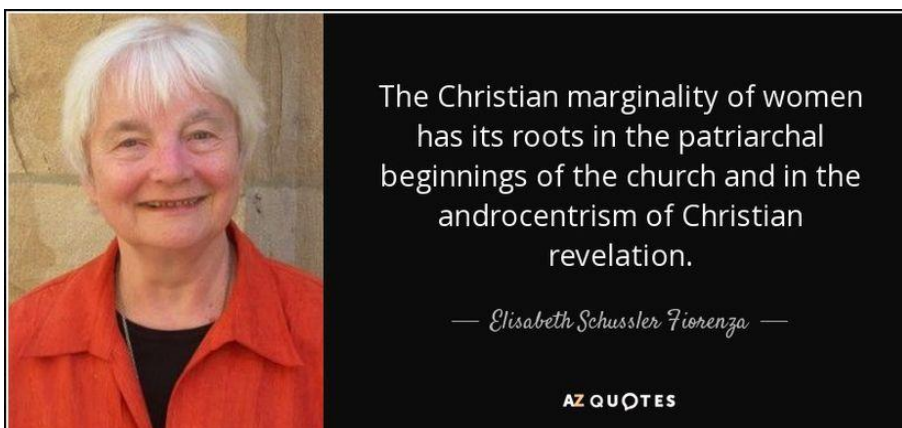
"Liberation means, therefore, to opt for the exercise of an ideological suspicion in order to unmask the unconscious ideological structures which dominate and which favour a powerful, privileged minority."
(O'Donnell, 1982)



There is a world behind the text (the culture of Jesus' day) and there is a world in front of the text, our own culture. These two horizons (Gadamer's term) need to merge in a valid interpretation that is critical.

Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza argues that theology is the product of each writer's experience and that this is determined by the historical and social context of every

theologian. Theology is culturally conditioned and shapes, reflects and serves a particular group's or individual's interests.
(Fiorenza 1975)



Ruether argues that the Bible is riddled with patriarchy and emerged from a world of hierarchy with males in charge. The feminine is constructed from these patriarchal values. The social relationships are archaic and inappropriate for our time: they are reflected in a male clergy and a continued tolerance of injustice and inequality.

Behind the interpretation of the Bible lies the acceptance of Aristotle's biology that sees men and women as two separate classes of human and whereby:

"The female is not only secondary to the male but lacks full human status in physical strength, moral self-control and mental capacity. The lesser "nature" thus confirms the female's subjugation to the male as her "natural" place in the universe". (Ruether 1985)

Questions:

1. What is 'a hermeneutic of suspicion'?

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2. What does Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza argue?

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3. According to Ruether, where is the 'feminine' constructed from?

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4. What lies behind the interpretation of the Bible?

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Gender and Gender Roles

The early feminist philosopher Mary Wollstonecraft published her work 'A Vindication of the Rights of Women' in 1792 in which she argued that women fundamentally have the same rights as men. Educating women was the highest priority – as well as refocusing them away from obsession with looks and outward accomplishments. Wollstonecraft was an early challenge to the patriarchy of her day.

It was not until 1928 that women were fully able to vote as equals to men in the UK and the contraceptive pill was only made fully accessible in 1974. Women could take control of pregnancies from 1967 when abortion was made legal and in 1970 women were allowed to be paid equally to men.



Feminism is often divided into three historical waves:

1. **First wave feminism:** Beginning in the second half of the twentieth century, this focused on equal rights for women, such as in the right to vote.
2. **Second wave feminism:** During the 1960s, this challenged patriarchy and pressed for women to have rights over their own selves, not just to exist as homemakers; the result was developments in sexual health.
3. **Third-wave feminism:** This began in the 1990s and explores gender roles and identities; women need to change the approach they take to themselves, making sure they don't conform to the stereotype of 'white heterosexual woman from the West.'

There are different approaches to the relationship between men and women:

- **Men are superior to women:** A view dating back to the ancients, such as Plato and Aristotle, but also held by Aquinas, who described women as 'defective'
- **Men and women are of equal value:** This is the idea that men and women are different, but of equal value, leading to mainly-male and mainly-female roles in the workplace and even in Church leadership.
- **Women are superior to men:** As advocated by Mary Daly (1928-2010); patriarchy in the Church has hidden women's superior knowledge.
- **Gender is not as straightforward as traditionally thought:** We can express ourselves as one or other gender, or as a mixture; it is artificial and misleading to assign characteristics to genders and not necessary to identify with the biological identity you have.

Christianity has sometimes been seen to struggle with where it should stand in relation to the above bullet points. Some Christians have accepted women in leadership roles in the Church; others believe it is a matter of theology, not equality, and that different rules apply in the context of the Church. Some Christians are accused of still supporting a patriarchal society. Contemporary Christians seem to be unsure of how to respond to new issues such as gender identity and expression, sexuality and so on. As we are in the middle of the third wave, Christians are often accused of being slow to respond (because they spend time discerning the will of God) and so Churches can frustrate those anxious to bring about change.



Questions:

1. What did Mary Wollstonecraft argue?

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2. What are the three historical waves of feminism? Explain them.

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3. What are the different approaches to the relationship between men and women?

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4. What is the diversity of belief about the relationship between men and women?

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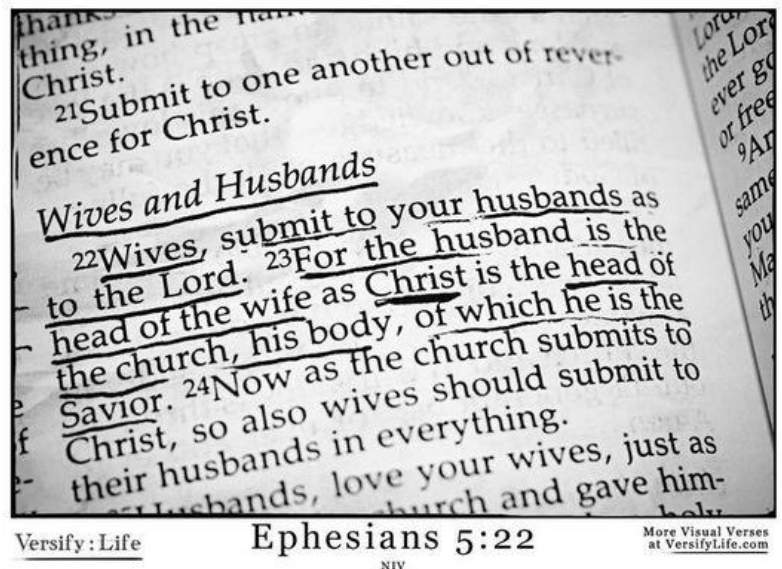
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Christian teaching on the roles of men and women in the family and society

Many Christians refer primarily to the story of creation in the Bible: man and woman were designed to work alongside each other in family life. However, many modern Christians will point to the understanding that the Bible should be read in the context of the time in which it was written and therefore can be forgiven for its narrow approach.



Ephesians 5:22-23

This passage, a set of instructions for Christian households, would have been a familiar approach to Paul's readers who were used to similar lists from Roman and Greek traditions. The passage is traditional in its outlook, although its interpretation over the years has varied.

- Wives should submit to their husbands
- The husband is the head of his wife

It also puts a Christian twist on the traditional views:

- The husband's leadership is like the leadership of Christ to the Church
- Husbands should love their wives like Christ loved the Church

This Christian twist is actually quite radical in outlook – Christ loved the Church so much he gave up his life for it, as a husband should do for his wife.

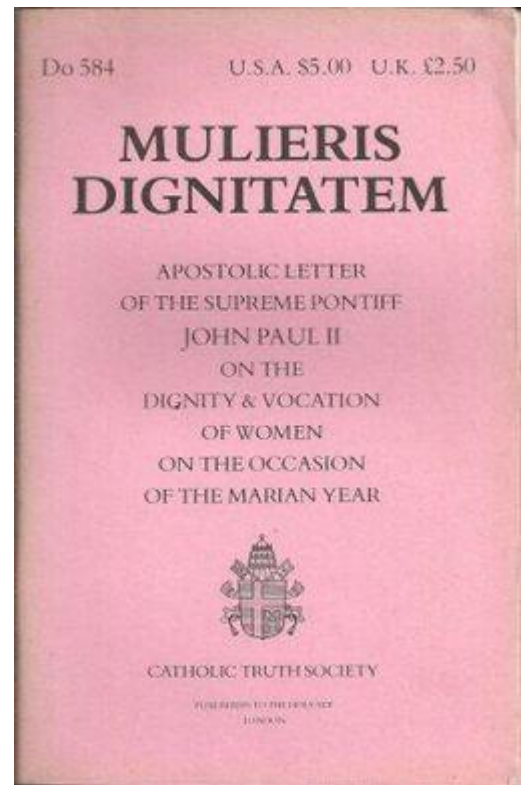
The familiar 'body of Christ' imagery also would have spoken to Paul's readers who were used to the idea that the Church is an inter-connected body of people; here it reminds us that marriage is a small section of a wider community and so family life is part of the wider life of Christianity.

Mulieris Dignitatem 18-19

This text is a Catholic 1988 letter of Pope John Paul II on the dignity and vocation of women in response to feminism (third-wave feminism would not have fully taken off by the time this was written). The emphasis was on

respect for women – respect that is mirrored by Mary, without whom the Christ-event would not have happened.

- Motherhood, a natural follow-on from marriage, which is part of the order of creation, comes from the total giving of a couple of each other, open to procreation, a way of sharing in God's act of creation.
- The psycho-physical structure of a woman is made for motherhood. Parenthood, although it is shared between the man and the woman is more specially the woman's. The man should learn parenthood from the mother.
- The mother has precedence over the man as the first teacher of the child: this is the spiritual aspect of motherhood.
- It is Mary's acceptance of the message of the angel that begins the New Covenant (the new relationship between God and humans brought about by Jesus).
- This understanding of motherhood must continue for modern mothers and they must be appropriately supported when their immense maternal love is challenged.



"It is therefore necessary that the man be fully aware that in their shared parenthood he owes a special debt to the woman. No programme of 'equal rights' between women and men is valid unless it takes this fact fully into account." Mulieris Dignitatem, 18

Questions:

1. What are the instructions given to Christian families in Ephesians 5:22-23?
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2. Why was the Christian 'twist' on the above radical for its time?
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3. What is '*Mulieris Dignitatem*'?

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4. What are the main messages of *Mulieris Dignitatem*?

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Motherhood / Parenthood

In *Mulieris Dignitatem*, the Catholic Church attempts to underline the special dignity, deliberately given by God at creation, to women to be mothers. This reflects many Christian approaches to the topic as the ability of women to be mothers is seen as a great privilege and not in any way making them lesser beings. However, in the context of suspicion of patriarchal institutions, some might feel that this approach is patronising, or limiting the abilities of women.



A response to this might be to reject any view of women that defines them as mothers first and foremost. Reading on in the document, one might feel that the stark alternative being suggested by the Pope for women is to be either mothers or virgins.

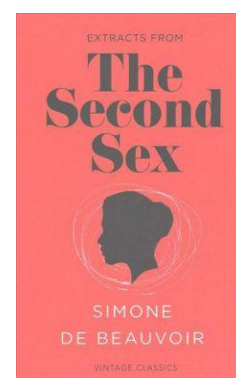
Fundamentalist Protestant traditions, which might read the Ephesians passage in a literal sense, would emphasise the role of the women as wife and mother; her role is primarily to create a home suitable for the husband. Other Protestants might take a view similar to that of the Catholic Church above.

A more literal approach removes the idea of motherhood from the definition of women. In line with many moves within third-wave feminism, it understands gender roles in less black and white terms. Mary may have been a role model, but not for everyone; just like Peter wouldn't be a typical role model for all men.

Is motherhood liberating or restricting?

Liberating	Restricting
It is what women were created for and so it is a way of them fulfilling their purpose. ("Fill the earth and subdue it" – Genesis)	A woman must give up her own life, interests and personality to take care of her children.
It draws on the natural abilities of women to be caring and nurturing.	It slows down progress with careers; it affects bodily health.
<i>Mulieris Dignitatem</i> suggests that motherhood is extremely liberating for women.	When children leave home, a woman is left without a proper purpose.
Some argue that a woman's desire to be a mother is biological.	Others argue that the desire is purely the result of social conditioning
A woman is able to provide the best start to the education of the next generation.	A woman's intelligence is wasted when at home with children.

The first three points on the 'restricting' side of the table come from the work of Simone de Beauvoir, whose work 'The Second Sex' (1949) says that women over time have let themselves be made into the inferior gender, defined by their relationship with men as wife, lover and object. De Beauvoir argued that society forms people into their gender identities and she calls on modern women to redefine who they are and to be who they want to be – whether that is a mother or not.



The above table provides an overly simplistic view of motherhood, which is neither simple to describe nor the same for every women. It also isolates motherhood – in many families, the mother has a partner to share the role with and this will help to define what it is to be a mother for that context.

Questions:

1. What does the Catholic Church attempt to underline in *Mulieris Dignitatem*?

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2. What did the Pope suggest for women later in *Mulieris Dignitatem*?

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3. How might Fundamental Christians read the Ephesians passage?

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4. How might literal Christians read the Ephesians passage?

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5. What are the arguments for motherhood being liberating?

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6. What are the arguments for motherhood being restricting?

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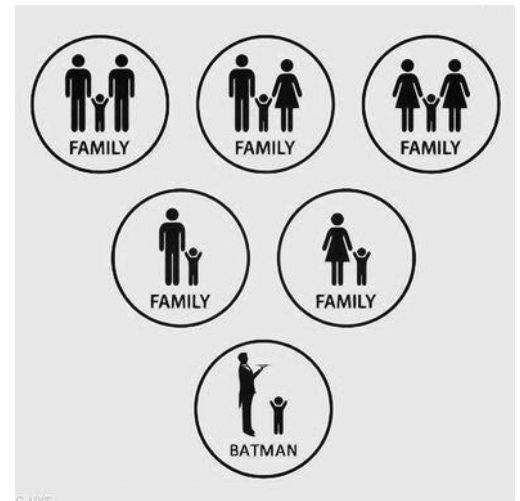
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Different Types of Family

Traditional Christians would emphasise the importance of the type of family they see in the Bible: heterosexual and married. They might accuse some feminists of changing the idea of love between a couple from selfless Christian love to a love based on the sexual aspect of the relationship. They argue that the Biblical model of marriage leads to support for struggling married couples in the community and a more stable society.



Other Christians accept that the traditional view of the family is not a reflection of the way people are made. If some are made homosexual and want to have children, then it follows that there will be loving families with same-gender parents. Any reluctance to endorse same-gender parents is a social issue, rather than a faith one for these Christians; Jesus himself welcomes those who did not fully conform to society; love needs to remain at the centre.

Another argument might be that in the Bible there are many different types of family – men with more than one wife or with children from concubines, for example. The argument would go that the idea of family is not predominantly religious and is more cultural and Christianity must welcome any model that current society offers.

Roman Catholic teaching is that families should be heterosexual and married. The Church condemns those who live together outside of marriage and does all that it can to prevent relationship breakdown. Catholics do not believe that women should necessarily remain at home but think that motherhood as a 'career choice' needs to be celebrated as much as any other career choice.

Is the idea of family entirely culturally determined?

The family is seen as a microcosm of society – a society that is made up of families that work well is likely to work well itself. Recently, the notion of family has changed rapidly. Marriage has been permitted in the UK for homosexual couples only since 2014 (civil partnerships because legal in 2005) and this will lead to a greater number of children from same-gender parents and inevitably lead to a change in the way that we look at families. By this

argument, the idea of family will be entirely determined by culture and Christians will need to decide how they react to what family is.

However, Christians believe that most are called to parenthood and family life, to mirror God's love and creative work and so on. Many commandments in the Bible concern family life and Catholic natural law supports families. Holding love at the centre of family life also mirrors many Christians' approach to ethics. Those Christians who believe heterosexual marriage is a fundamental part of the order of creation will do all they can to defend this model of family life.



Questions:

1. What family type might traditional Christians emphasise? Why?
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2. In opposition to your answer to (1), what might other Christians accept? Why?
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3. What examples of 'family' are there in the Bible?
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4. What does the Roman Catholic Church teach?
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5. Give an argument for and against the idea of family entirely culturally determined.
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Against:

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