

***Webinar Women in religions***  
***Addressing structural discrimination and domestic violence***

**Tuesday, March 5, 2024,**

**18.00 – 19.30 via Zoom**

**CONTENT:** We are pleased to invite you to our webinar with the theme "Women and Religions". We want to give a deeper insight into the position of women in different religions and their struggle for equal rights and against structural discrimination and domestic violence.

**Topics and discussion points:** Are religions an obstacle to women's development and the pursuit of gender equality? Does the involvement with religion have gender-specific effects?

**1. Fight against inequality,** structural discrimination and domestic violence: We will look at the challenges women face, both in terms of equality and domestic violence, and how different religions deal with them.

**2. Influence of religion on women:** impact of religion on women: Discussing the influence of belief systems on women's lives - in particular, whether religion favors violence against women.

**3. Future perspectives:** Sharing thoughts on how the status of women in different religions can and should be improved.

We cordially invite representatives of all religions and beliefs to participate in this open dialogue. Together we can foster understanding, build bridges and help shape a more inclusive and equitable future for women in religious communities. We look forward to your active participation and a constructive, stimulating dialogue.

**The Committee NGOs as advocates for gender equality and women's rights highly welcomes this webinar and some of its members have supported the preparation of it.**

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## Introduction Gabriela Frey:

### Women in religions - Addressing structural discrimination & violence against women

Welcome to all, thankful that you have joined. The topic of *women in religions* has already been addressed by the CINGO in 2014 in the report *Human Rights & Religions* and many members of our committee have contributed to it. Unfortunately, structural discrimination persists and violence against women has reached alarming proportions. When every hour around 14 women are victims of intimate partner violence and almost every day a partner or ex-partner tries to kill women, this is no longer acceptable and we must look for solutions and responsibilities.

Today we wish to investigate what part religious and faith institutions play in the violent treatment of women. As early as 2010, a study of 26,800 respondents aged from 15 years and older was carried out with the question: **Do you see in religious convictions a source for violence against women?** At that time, 60% answered yes, 33% no and 7% did not know. It would be interesting to conduct this survey again 14 years later.

Not only do I represent the EBU in the Council of Europe, but I am also the founding president of Sakyadhita France, the French branch of the international association of Buddhist women. Since the founding of Sakyadhita Int. in 1987, thousands of Buddhist women from across the world meet every 2 years for a congress to discuss ways to empower women and share best practices to eliminate structural discrimination and violence against women. In June 2023, Thea and I attended the Sakyadhita Congress in Seoul, South-Korea. Among all contributions, the one from Dr. Diana Cousens of the Buddhist Council of Victoria and vice-president of Sakyadhita Australia particularly appealed to us, on the topic: **Preventing family violence and violence against women among Buddhist communities in Victoria, Australia.**

In 2019, the government in the Australian state of Victoria commissioned a **technical paper to find out how faith leaders can best respond to prevent family violence & violence against women.** *Violence against women occurs in all communities and environments, including faith communities. Faith plays a central role in many people's lives. We turn to faith and religious leaders for social, moral and ethical guidance and support. Through faith we can also form strong social networks based on shared beliefs and respect. Faith-based communities have great potential and capacity to prevent violence against women and offer support to those who experience it. However, like any community, faith leaders and faith-based communities sometimes promote, follow or reinforce norms and relationships that drive or condone violent behaviours.*

Domestic violence and violence against women - affects significant numbers of people in diverse faith communities in Europe and worldwide. It is not confined to physical and sexual violence but also encompasses financial, emotional and psychological abuse. It can include social isolation and economic deprivation. This problem is found across ethnic and religious groups and affects people of all ages. Governments have tried different strategies to tackle it

over many years. The most catastrophic outcome of family violence is death, and intimate partner violence is a major cause of homicide.

In addition to the technical paper mentioned above, the Australian campaign has produced an impressive series of tools: A Faith Leader's Practice Guide with training offers, a paper: **Faith Communities Supporting Healthy Family Relationships**, multilingual infos for migrants and many more. Trying to present everything here would take us too far. But I would very much wish to see a similar campaign emerging in Europe. After each webinar we create a booklet with all contributions and links for further exploration. And now I'm looking forward to our guests and their contributions and hand over to Dr Thea Mohr.

#### **Links and Downloads:**

#### **Toolkit: Preventing and Responding to Family Violence: A Faith Leader's Practice Guide**

- <https://www.wire.org.au/preventing-and-responding-to-family-violence-a-faith-leaders-practice-guide-and-toolkit/>

#### **Faith Communities Supporting Healthy Family Relationships**

- <https://bcv.org.au/buddhist-family-violence-pilot-project/>

#### **Technical Paper** "Faith communities supporting healthy family relationships:

- <https://bcv.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Technical-Paper.pdf>

#### **Evidence Guide: What works** to address violence against women & family violence in faith settings.

- <https://bcv.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Faith-Communities-Addressing-Violence-Against-Women-and-Family-Violence-What-Works-3.pdf>

#### **Resources for children in Dhamma Clubs to promote healthy family relationships**

- [100 positive words postcard](#)
- [Dealing with strong emotions Brochure](#)
- [How to be a good friend poster](#)
- [Respectful Relationships infographic](#)
- [Tips for controlling anger infographic](#)
- [What is Violence brochure](#)

#### **Family violence help card in various community languages, here English:**

<https://bcv.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/512921-Buddhist-Council-Info-Brochures-FV-Help-ENG.pdf>

**Sakyadhita Australia** : <https://www.sakyadhita.org/>

**Some facts and figure from Europe:**

**Statistic 2023: Do you see in religious convictions a source for violence against women?**

	Europe	Germany	
YES	60 %	70 %	
NO	33%	22 %	
Don't know	7 %	8 %	

**Resource :** <https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/166496/umfrage/meinung-ueber-religion-als-ursache-fuer-haeusliche-gewalt-gegen-frauen/>

**Germany:**

- Around every 2 minutes a person is victim of domestic violence (in Germany)
- Every hour more then 14 women are victim of violence of their partner
- Almost every day a partner/expatnrner tries to kill his wife
- 71,1 % of domestic violence victims are women / 76,3 % of perpetrators are men.

**Resource:** <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/aktuelles/lagebild-haeusliche-gewalt-2201488>

**Violence against women in the EU:**

[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2020/659333/EPRS\\_BRI\(2020\)659333\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2020/659333/EPRS_BRI(2020)659333_EN.pdf)

**Council of Europe** What causes gender-based violence?

<https://www.coe.int/en/web/gender-matters/what-causes-gender-based-violence>

**Tatiana Letovaltseva**, PhD student at KU Leuven and the Royal Military Academy, several leading functions in the 4th Engineering Battalion. CBRN Staff Officer, she joined the Directorate General Health and Wellbeing in 2018, coordinator of the Religious & Moral Assistance Division.

Hello everyone,

I'm very honoured to be able to introduce this webinar on a very important topic: "Women in religions. Remediating structural discrimination structural discrimination and violence against women". It promises to be a rich webinar, with some remarkable speakers whose lives and careers are sure to inspire admiration.

I'd like to apologise for not being able to be with you this evening, as I'm currently in the United States taking part in a women's rights conference in the United States to take part in a conference of Jewish military chaplains.

This experience also offered me a unique opportunity to experience an exceptional Shabbat in the company of the local Orthodox Jewish community. The fascinating exchanges I had with the women present shed light on their day-to-day realities, enriching my thoughts, which I share with you today, as a mother, wife, officer in the Belgian army, citizen committed to promoting interfaith dialogue and aspiring scientific researcher.

Having been brought up in different traditions, at the age of 18 I joined a rigorously secular and predominantly male professional environment by joining the military system. This transition led me to deconstruct part of my individual identity in order to reconstruct it in the light of the shared values of the Belgian Defence community.

In the past, the slogan "Militaire je suis, femme je reste" (I'm a soldier, I'm still a woman) was used in Defence communication campaigns. Personally, I've always found it difficult to relate to this statement, given that the physical, academic and moral requirements are virtually identical for men and women, with the exception of the basic tests.

Throughout my career, whether at the Royal Military Academy or as a leader in an operational unit, I have never felt the need to emphasise my gender. Professional and personal excellence have always been the predominant criteria, neutralising any form of distinction between men and women.

I'm well aware that some of my colleagues have unfortunately had to deal with cases of sexual intimidation in the workplace, and although I myself have experienced a few derogatory remarks from people of dubious morale during exercises, I've never felt the need to highlight my gender.

I have to admit that I have never encountered any professional difficulties directly linked to my gender. The secular and neutral environment, focused on operational imperatives, also

seems to have spared me any form of direct or indirect discrimination, enabling me to carry out my leadership role in the best possible conditions, managing both men and women. However, the experience of motherhood and marriage has profoundly transformed my perception of myself. Although I continued my professional career, the priority given to the well-being of my family often led to unexpected and previously unimaginable challenges in reconciling my personal life with my military career.

Although my identity appeared to be genderless in the eyes of the military organisation, it was particularly difficult for me to maintain my femininity outside the professional sphere, as the army also permeated almost every aspect of my private life.

Finally, an unprecedented professional challenge, requiring answers to my deepest existential questions, finally pushed me to leave the operational field to join the chaplains, the Belgian military chaplaincies.

It's a journey that could resonate, in one way or another, with that of many other women officers of various religious and philosophical convictions. Is this a simple coincidence or a more general pattern?

This week, at the conference, I had the opportunity to have an enriching exchange with a magnificent woman from the Orthodox Jewish tradition. This woman, who has given birth to 10 children, shared her experience with me with great sincerity. She described to me how strict and rigorous she had to be to instil discipline her children, especially when they were young. However, she expressed her deep joy at seeing them grow into caring, loving adults. Although our realities are different, I was able to recognise in her the same strength of character as an officer with long experience of command.

Far from wishing to impose any kind of slogan, these extracts from my personal experience are simply intended to open up a few lines of thought:

- In a secularised and democratic society, is it really guaranteed that women have equal and fair access to higher social status, or is it still necessary today to tacitly asexualise oneself in order to access these positions?

- Can a secular private life and/or a neutral professional environment guarantee respect for women and automatically prevent all forms of violence and discrimination?

- Do certain belief systems favour women's place in society more than others?

- Are patriarchal structures or more traditional family models inherent in religions and do they have a direct or indirect impact on the well-being and development of women?

I suggest that you incorporate my questions into your own reflections, as they relate to the themes that will be discussed this evening, in particular the "fight against inequality" and "the influence of beliefs on women". Our distinguished speakers, Janine Elkouby, Tiar Rkia, Christine Pedotti and Dr. Carola Roloff, will have the opportunity to explore these topics with

you in greater depth.

To conclude my introduction, I would like to say a word about future prospects, which will certainly be explored in detail in the conclusions of this webinar. Interfaith and interreligious dialogue, as well as intrafaith and intrareligious dialogue, can undoubtedly play a positive role in improving the status of women.

Dialogue between communities of conviction offers the opportunity not only to reassess one's own beliefs through authentic and enriching encounters, but also to discover and possibly reconsider, by comparison, one's own level of well-being, as I recently experienced myself during my immersion in the Orthodox Jewish community.

The 'Rencontres Européennes Interconvictionnelles' (REVEILS) project, which we are currently seeking to develop at the European level, is a good example of this. We are currently seeking to develop at European level in collaboration with this committee and other European institutions, aims to highlight all the initiatives, people and associations that promote this type of exchange. The aim is to institutionalise the values and benefits of this dialogue within European structures. We are convinced that this project will have a significant impact and may encourage the creation of structural solutions.

Finally, I'd like to end with this quote from a 2023 study by Georgetown University on the links between the status of women and democracy:

"(...) countries where women are doing well tend to be countries with fair elections, autonomous civil societies, and independent and accountable government institutions."<sup>1</sup>

Assessing the well-being of women in a society involves understanding that society's potential for socio-economic prosperity, as well as the quality of its democratic governance. Investing time and energy in improving the status of women is therefore a highly significant undertaking, and interreligious/interconvictional dialogue is an essential part of it. Dialogue can play a crucial role in this effort. That is why the discussions in this webinar will be essential and relevant.

Thank you for your attention, and I'd like to express my particular gratitude to Thea, Murielle, Gabriela and Lilia for their confidence, dynamism, commitment and availability.

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<sup>1</sup> Source: Exploring-the-Links-between-Womens-Status-and-Democracy.pdf (georgetown.edu)  
– Last accessed 05 03 24).



**Janine Elkouby**, 2006 vice-president of the Consistoire Israelite du Bas-Rhin, 2011 Chevalier of the Order of Merit. She was appointed "Yaqirath Haqehila" by the Chief Rabbi of France (30 October 2022)

## **Jewish women**

### **Preamble**

\* The Jewish world is plural: it is criss-crossed by diverse currents, modes of thought and identification, making it a variegated universe, no single component of which can claim to exhaust the Jewish being. From a sociological point of view, Jewish communities can be divided into three streams: Orthodox, Massorti or Conservative, and Liberal or Reform. There's a famous Jewish joke about a Jew stranded on a desert island who builds two synagogues, explaining later, once he's rescued, that one is where he prays and the other is where he doesn't set foot! In short, this is the contemporary version of the culture of disagreement that, according to David Banon, defines rabbinic civilisation and literature.

\* The vast majority of Jewish women, like all other citizens, appreciate just how lucky they are to live in an age when they have unprecedented freedom of choice. And at a time when fundamentalist Islamism is trying to revive the subjection of women and cancel culture is sacrificing the universal in favour of all-out relativisation, they feel particularly concerned by the threats and have no intention of giving up any of these hard-won freedoms in their social lives.

It is in the world of community and religion that the problems for them arise.

### **I) The evolution of the Jewish community**

Current developments in Jewish communities are marked by a dual phenomenon: on the one hand, rampant assimilation following a loss of the feeling of belonging to the community, and on the other hand, a search for identity resulting in a return to the sources and to study, an increase in religious practice, but also in a hardening of certain behaviours, including a mistrust of women and an extension of non-mixing.

Many women feel, to varying degrees and with varying degrees of awareness, a sense of unease, a difficulty in reconciling the different perceptions of their place as women in their two identities. They live in a context that rejects patriarchal models, even if these are more tenacious than they appear; they refer to an egalitarian and complementary model of the couple, not to a dominant and dominated model.

Some, at the cost of a perilous great divide, are seeking a difficult balance.

Others, exasperated and desperate, end up choosing the clean slate option and throw overboard a little, a lot or passionately what appears to them to be an old-fashioned web of loose threads, but always with pain and an inconsolable sense of loss.

Still others, overwhelmed by the magnitude of the challenge and the risks involved, and feeling their familiar world and the certainties that underpinned it teeter dangerously on the brink, fall back, anxious and nostalgic, on the position of a safe haven tradition where everyone's place is fixed and recognised once and for all.

## **II) The situation of women**

In France, the situation of women varies according to the type of community to which they belong. In the Reform communities, equality between men and women is fully recognised, more and more women are becoming rabbis and Delphine Horvilleur, the charismatic rabbi who is a media darling, has become a household name.

In the Orthodox communities, which are in the majority in France, on the other hand, women are faced with real inequality in legal and judicial terms; they come up against obstacles that hinder and hold them back; they are confronted with sometimes painful problems that put them at odds with the world in which they live.

This gap is noticeable in four areas: religious life, public life, access to education and family law.

1) In Orthodox communities, it is impossible for a woman to perform a religious function: she does not count towards the minyan, the quorum of ten men required to perform a service, she cannot testify in court, she cannot publicly lead prayer, nor can she be called to the Torah. Every morning, Jewish men recite a blessing in which they thank God for not having made them women.

2) Public life is also marked by discrimination: the number of women in the leading bodies of Judaism is low; they encounter more or less straightforward obstacles in their desire to reach positions of responsibility in the community. One example is the anachronistic fight that women had to wage for a year in 2006 to be eligible for membership of the Consistoire Israélites concordataires<sup>2</sup>, even though French law required them to be eligible. In many communities, women cannot be presidents or are confined to certain areas of activity. Men's resistance to change in this area is enormous.

3) Access to knowledge, despite the fact that study, the very essence of being Jewish, is the first duty of men, remains limited for women: in Jewish schools, the Talmud, the very heart of study, is still reserved exclusively for boys. There are practically no places that teach Talmud to women, apart from a few rare private initiatives, whereas in Israel and the USA there are many institutes that offer very high-level teaching to women.

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Sonia Sarah Lipsyc, « Le combat emblématique de l'éligibilité des femmes au Consistoire israélite du Bas-Rhin », in *Les cahiers du Judaïsme* n° 24, 2008,

4) Family law is the area where the problems facing women remain the most serious and painful: religious divorce or *guet*, originally a unilateral act of repudiation, is now all too often used as a tool by unscrupulous husbands who, backed by a certain real inertia on the part of the rabbinical establishment, refuse to grant it or pay for it, turning their wife into an *agouna*, a forsaken woman who cannot rebuild her life.

It has to be said that, when it comes to the position of women, immobility is king in today's Jewish society in France. Yet in the past, Jewish law has been able to deal effectively with social and political change. Yet the place of women, as it appears in the biblical narrative, opens up other perspectives, revealed by a gallery of strong, determined female figures. And, in fact, we have to realise that this immobility is rooted more in fear - fear of women, fear of change, fear of losing control - than in the texts.

### **III) The current context**

The religious difficulties faced by Jewish women within their community are real. However, I want to make it clear that today they are relegated to second place. Because they suddenly seem derisory at a time when the world is turning upside down. On 7 October, at the ball of the damned, the Shoah was invited, under the grimacing face of the monsters of Hamas. And the horrified condemnations of the first few days were quickly drowned out by the outpouring of anti-Jewish hatred that we thought was over. The Jews of France, like those throughout the world, were suddenly seized with vertigo, and a terrible chill froze their hearts and souls. And Jewish women saw the true face of pseudo-feminists who, across the spectrum, draped themselves for seven weeks in a compact, deafening silence, unable to wring from their hearts, their lips, their brains, a basic, necessary word of condemnation of a pogrom from the darkest past. "Metoo unless I'm Jewish"...

I would not, however, like to end on such a sombre note. Hope is the Jewish virtue par excellence. And the history of the Jews, written and interwoven in two millennia of persecution, is nothing other than a fierce and invincible declaration of hope. The light of reason will triumph over obscure passions, the love of life will overcome the fascination of death and peace, the marvellous peace sung by the biblical prophets, will overcome the folly of mankind.

**Tiar Rkia**, member of Religions for Peace Europe (*RfP*), President of the European Women of Faith Network since 2023

### **Introduction to Islam and women**

- Islam, like all great religions, is interpreted in many different ways by its followers around the world. These interpretations affect the daily lives, rights and opportunities of women in significant ways.

#### **1. Islamic principles and gender equality**

- Islam advocates the spiritual equality of men and women. The Koran repeatedly stresses the importance of justice, mercy and equality. For example, Sura Al-Hujurat (49:13) refers to the fundamental equality of all mankind.

- However, the application of these principles in everyday life can vary considerably. In some societies, traditional interpretations dominate, where gender roles are strictly defined, while in others, more progressive readings seek to promote gender equality.

#### **2. Specific challenges in Muslim communities**

- The question of inheritance, the right to divorce, and testimony in court are areas where Muslim women may encounter inequalities depending on the legal interpretation (*fiqh*) followed in their community.

- Gender-based violence, including honour killings and restrictions on personal freedom, are serious issues in some communities, often justified by misinterpretations of Islamic teachings.

#### **3. Muslim women and emancipation**

- Many Muslim women around the world are challenging traditional norms based on Islamic teachings. They advocate for girls' education, political and economic participation, and against harmful practices such as child marriage and polygamy without consent.

- Muslim scholars, Islamic feminists and activists play a crucial role in reinterpreting the sacred texts of Islam to promote gender equality. They point to examples of powerful women in Islamic history, such as Khadija, the first wife of the Prophet Muhammad, who was a successful merchant.

- Islam, in all its diversity, offers both challenges and opportunities for women's rights and gender equality. The key to advancement lies in internal dialogue within the Muslim community, education, and engagement with progressive interpretations that value equality and justice for all, regardless of gender.

Encouraging a nuanced understanding of Islam and supporting the voices of Muslim women in their struggle for equality are essential to overcoming the cultural and structural barriers to women's emancipation.

- The evolution of the status of women in Islam is a complex and nuanced subject that depends largely on the interpretation and practice of Islam in different regions and cultures around the

world. It is important to note that Islam itself cannot be reduced to a single perspective, as there are many schools of thought, traditions and interpretations within the religion, However, there are some trends and reflections on the future status of women in Islam that can be considered:

- **Reinterpretation of sacred texts:** Some contemporary Muslim intellectuals, both men and women, are calling for a reinterpretation of the sacred texts of Islam, including the Qur'an, in order to emphasise gender equality and challenge traditional interpretations that have often been seen as discriminatory towards women.

- **Increasing participation of women:** In many Muslim communities around the world, there has been an increase in the participation of women in public life, including education, politics, business and the judiciary.

civil society. This increased participation could also be reflected in the religious context, with more women in leadership positions in mosques and religious institutions.

- **Debates on the veil:** The wearing of the Islamic veil, such as the hijab, is a subject of debate in many Muslim societies. Some Muslim activists and intellectuals advocate the right of women to choose freely whether or not to wear the veil, challenging the social norms that have often imposed the veil on women.

- **Combating violence and discriminatory practices:** Muslim women's movements and women's rights organisations continue to fight against gender-based violence, forced marriages, female genital mutilation and other discriminatory practices that may be perpetrated in the name of Islam. These movements help to raise awareness and bring about positive change.

Education and empowerment: The education of Muslim women continues to expand, further empowering them educationally, economically and socially. As women become more educated and empowered, they are better equipped to make informed decisions about their religious lives and their role in society. The history of women in Islam is rich and complex. From the pre-Islamic period to modern times, significant progress has been made. However, the road to equality and justice is still ongoing. As a community, it is crucial that we continue to research, understand and apply the teachings of Islam in an equitable manner, while striving to correct misinterpretations and injustices inherited from the past.

- **Spiritual equality:**

o Surah 3, verse 195: "Their Lord then granted them permission [saying], 'I do not let any labourer among you, male or female, lose his labour; you are one from another.'" This verse

emphasises the spiritual equality and recognition of each other's efforts, men and women, in the eyes of God.

**- Mutual rights and responsibilities:**

o Sura 2, verse 187: "They are a garment for you and you are a garment for them." This verse illustrates the intimate and protective relationship between men and women, emphasising their interdependence and equality in marriage.

**- Right to inheritance:**

o Sura 4, verse 7: "To men belongs a share of what is left by parents and close relatives, and to women a share of what is left by parents and close relatives, whether a little or a lot - a fixed share." This verse clearly establishes women's right to inheritance, revolutionary for the time of its revelation.

**- The right to protection and dignity:**

o Sura 33, verse 35: "Men submissive to God, submissive women, believing men, believing women, obedient men, obedient women, truthful men, truthful women, patient men, patient women, humble men, humble women, men giving alms, women giving alms, men fasting, women fasting, men keeping their chastity, women keeping their chastity, men invoking God often, women invoking God - to all of them God has prepared forgiveness and an enormous reward. " This verse emphasises equality in spirituality and devotion, attributing the same merits and rewards to the religious commitment of men and women.

o These verses can be used to illustrate how Islam established rights for women and promoted gender equality from its inception. It is important to note that the interpretation and application of these verses may vary according to cultural and legal contexts. By quoting them, you can highlight the importance of returning to the core texts to understand women's rights in Islam and challenge interpretations that undervalue them.

**Conclusion:**

**- It is important to remember that the evolution of the status of women in Islam is an ongoing process that depends on many factors, including culture, tradition, social movements and individuals. Opinions and practices vary considerably from one community to another, and there is no single consensus on these issues. However, many individuals and groups continue to work to promote gender equality and women's empowerment within Islam, which suggests that positive changes can be made in the future.**

**Christine Pedotti**, journalist, author, editor of the magazine *Témoignage Chrétien*, Christian intellectual, co-founder with Anne Soupa of the *Conférence catholique des baptisé-e-s francophones (CCBF)* and the *Comité de la Jupe*.

### **Jesus first feminism**

To state it in this way is obviously an anachronism, yet there is a profound truth in it. The founding texts of Christianity are profoundly emancipatory, and emancipatory of women in particular.

Religions are usually accused of justifying situations of oppression of women and of being among the vectors for the maintenance of patriarchal and masculinist societies. It is true that at first glance, at least in the three great monotheisms, the place of women is hardly glorious. For the most part, they are placed in a position of minority and inferiority, subject to male authority - to put it in contemporary terms, sub-citizens. It is true that the figure of God, while theoretically not gendered, neither feminine nor masculine, is in fact a figure of masculine authority. In Christianity, God is principally 'Father' and to some extent 'son', so it's only a short step from thinking that men are closer to God than women, a step that has been blithely taken over the centuries.

And yet, one thing is intriguing: it is in societies that have been Christianised for a very long time that the emancipation of women has arisen. One might conclude that a great deal of alienation led to revolt (a holy revolt), but perhaps this was because, in the end, the most fundamental texts of Christianity are not as misogynistic as one might think.

Catholicism presents a strange paradox: women are excluded from everything, since all authority is concentrated in the hands of clerics, deacons, priests and bishops, all of whom are men, and yet the act that 'makes' a Christian, the first of the sacraments, baptism, is a gender-neutral act: both boys and girls are baptised with exactly the same gestures and in the same terms. Strict equality reigns between boys and girls from the outset.

I hypothesise that slowly but surely, over the centuries, this reality has eaten away at masculinist domination, unbeknownst to the power of the men of religion.

One of the arguments used by men of the Church against women was the authority of the figure of Jesus, supposedly the founder of a small group and his twelve chosen disciples, an exclusively male group.

Aren't there any women in the Gospels? Of course there are, but they don't really count and are rarely referred to by name. They are like still lifes, frozen in the background, if you follow the reading and comments made over the centuries by men of religion.

However, I decided to find out for myself and take a closer look at what was going on between Jesus and women in the founding texts of Christianity, the four Gospels. I set out with the idea that since these texts were written by men, they would necessarily adopt a male point of view and that I would have to scrape away this layer of masculism to perhaps discover another facet of Jesus' relationship with women.

However, to my great surprise, I realised that the texts I was reading bore no trace of the masculine and patriarchal culture I had expected to find there. Not the slightest trace of misogyny, no derogatory remarks about women, quite the contrary. I discovered that the erasure of women was not the fault of the evangelical authors but of a reading that had been done exclusively by men for centuries, men who quite simply had not seen women.

I will take two examples of this blindness. Both are taken from the Gospel according to Luke, which is undoubtedly the most 'feminist' of the Gospel writers, since it is the one that lists the women who accompany Jesus as he preaches throughout Galilee and Judea. In this way, we can change our perspective and see Jesus not only surrounded by male camaraderie, but walking with a group made up of men and women.

(Luke 11, 27-28)

Now Jesus enters a village. As he passes, the text tells us, a woman cries out:

"Blessed are the wombs that bore you, blessed are the breasts that you sucked". Jesus' reply is immediate: "Blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep it".

This tiny passage from the Gospel is interesting because it speaks of the woman's body and one of its particularities, its capacity to give life. You might think that Jesus would exalt this aspect of womanhood. Not so. He transfers the blessing to the ability to listen to the Word of God. It's worth noting that Jesus' mother is not disqualified by these words, since the same author of the Gospel describes her at the time of the announcement of Jesus' birth as keeping in her heart the word transmitted to her by an angel on behalf of God. What "honours" the mother of Jesus is not her biology, her womb or her breasts, but her mind and her heart.

For all that, the Christian religious establishment assigned Mary mother of Jesus to her body, virgin and mother, and all women with her.

The Evangelist tells another woman's story that is even more interesting in terms of the blindness that male readers of the Gospels have shown over the centuries, and that is the story of two sisters, Martha and Mary, with whom Jesus stops to rest. In just a few lines, the scene becomes clear: Martha, the eldest, mistress of the house and mistress of the woman, with a strong mouth, takes charge to welcome the visitor and friend with dignity, as well as the group of men and women accompanying him. The text tells us that she is bustling in the kitchen and giving orders. Her sister, Mary, did not join in the commotion. She sits at Jesus' feet and listens to him. But Martha didn't hear him and appeared visibly angry. She has this wonderful phrase, in which the reproach is addressed to both Jesus and her sister. She says to Jesus: "Don't you care that my sister lets me serve all by myself? Tell her to help me". Many



women will recognise themselves in these words. Martha protested because she was carrying the mental burden of the house alone and wanted help. Strangely enough, she asks the man for help, not her sister directly. Mary obviously does not comply, and neither does Jesus. He did not send Mary to help his sister; on the contrary, he replied: "Mary has chosen the best place; it will not be taken from her". In fact, Mary at the feet of Jesus chose the place of a disciple; in Jesus' time, the expression "to study at the feet of..." really meant to be someone's disciple. Paul of Tarsus said of himself, to affirm his competence as a Pharisee, that he had "studied at the feet of Gamaliel", one of the great teachers of the time.

We learn from Jesus that a woman's place can be that of a disciple if she has chosen it, that it is "the best place". A fine basis for mediation when we talk about "the place of women" in religious institutions.

But the most astonishing thing about this story is how it has been interpreted throughout Christian history. It has never been read as a question about the "place of women" in the kitchen or in study. The text, read by men, has always been read as a metaphor. Martha represents the part of missionary activity, of "pastoral work", Mary, the part of meditation and prayer. One the temporal, the other the spiritual, one the things of earth, the other the things of heaven. Men have appropriated this story and have not read its original meaning: Jesus does not assign women to domestic work. He is even disparaging towards his hostess Martha, who "fusses about vain things". He refuses to allow Martha to become the sword of propriety, and returns Mary to what she assumes to be the "natural" role of women: looking after the house and the men.

These two little texts, taken from among many others, show two things: firstly, that there is no assignment of women to a particular or specific role linked to their "nature" or their body in the founding texts of Christianity, but that the secular reading done by men has erased and made women invisible. I could give many examples. I will simply remind you that it is women and only women who are witnesses to the resurrection and are responsible for announcing it to the male disciples.

To conclude, in the founding texts of Christianity, through the words and gestures of Jesus himself and reported by the authors of the Gospels, women have the leading role, but almost twenty centuries of exclusively male reading and commentary have made them invisible. It wasn't until the texts were widely read and commented on by women themselves that they reappeared, allowing the question of the place of women to be asked afresh. A question that is always very difficult to ask in a world dominated exclusively by men.

**Dr. Carola Roloff**, Buddhist nun, visiting professor of Buddhism at the Academy of World Religions at the University of Hamburg since 2018

## **Women in Buddhism: Overcoming structural discrimination and domestic violence**

Ladies and gentlemen, dear colleagues and friends,

It is an honour for me to speak to you today about the position of women in Buddhism, particularly about the challenges of structural discrimination and domestic violence.

### **Basic principles of Buddhism vs. social reality**

The fundamental principles of Buddhism are non-violence (*ahiṃsā*), equanimity (*upekṣā*), love (*maitrī*) and compassion (*karuṇā*). Despite these noble ideals, social reality reveals discrimination against women, even in Buddhist societies. This discrepancy between religious ideals and social practice shows an apparent contradiction we must address.

### **Three types of violence in Buddhism**

Buddhism recognises physical, verbal and psychological violence. Violence against women (VAW) manifests itself in all three forms and is in direct contradiction with the teachings of Buddhism. Raising awareness about the existence and causes of VAW is crucial for developing strategies to combat this violence.

### **Feminist movements and structural violence**

There was a discussion about reviving higher ordination for Buddhist nuns, which we already discussed in a 2016 workshop (similar to the lack of ordination of women to the priesthood in some Christian traditions). Some of you will remember this. This discussion around the revival of the higher ordination of women in those Buddhist traditions where it no longer exists – unlike in Buddha's time – highlights the structural and cultural violence against women. At the same time, it shows the need for feminist reform movements within Buddhism. These movements call for critical self-reflection within religious communities and the recognition of women's spiritual equality. It is about nothing less than gender justice within the religions!

### **Patriarchal structures and androcentrism**

The theological construction of gender identities and patriarchal dominance has historically served to justify the supremacy of men. This perspective is crucial for understanding structural discrimination in religious traditions and requires critical examination and adaptation.

### **Prospects and possible solutions**

Interdisciplinary cooperation in gender and religion is essential for an inclusive and just future. By combining religious ideals with modern societal challenges, we can develop effective strategies to combat VAW and improve the position of women in religious communities.

### **Education as the key to gender equality in religions**

To conclude our dialogue, I want to highlight the importance of educational institutions, especially universities, to improve the situation of women in religious contexts. With its

unique perspective on the teachings of non-self (*anātman*) and conditional origination (*pratīyasamutpāda*), Buddhism offers us a critical view of rigid gender roles and identities. This perspective invites us to think beyond traditional essentialising gender constructions and can contribute to promoting more profound gender justice.

The Academy of World Religions at the University of Hamburg exemplifies how, by initiating a dialogue between Buddhism and other world religions and developing a Buddhist theology, academic institutions can play a central role in promoting gender justice. A contextual reinterpretation of religious texts considering modern societal challenges is essential.

The challenge, however, lies in the need for an established Buddhist theology at European universities that would promote interreligious dialogue and an inclusive attitude towards all religions and faiths. Universities must, therefore, serve as platforms for this dialogue and support the development of theologies of all religions. The inclusion of Buddhism as one of the world's religions includes the creation of chairs and degree programmes dedicated to studying and teaching Buddhist theology to actively combat gender discrimination and promote a deeper understanding of the role of women in religious contexts.

We can create a society based on mutual respect, understanding and equality through such an inclusive and interdisciplinary approach. The University of Hamburg's initiatives offer valuable models for other academic institutions promoting gender equality and interfaith dialogue.

### **Conclusion**

Overcoming structural discrimination and domestic violence requires far more than a debate within the confines of religious institutions. It fundamentally re-evaluates and transforms our social, spiritual, philosophical, and ideological foundations. The challenge is to create a new paradigm that ensures not only the full participation of women in religions but also their equality in all areas of society. It is time for us to take our responsibility seriously across all religious and ideological boundaries and work towards an inclusive world in which every person, regardless of gender, can live free from discrimination and violence. Such a process requires a profound reflection and renewal of our religious and philosophical texts, traditions, and social practices to promote the dignity and equality of all beings in accordance with the most profound wisdom and teachings. Together, we have the power to build bridges of understanding and cooperation that lead to a more just and compassionate society.

### **Concluding remarks by Gabriela Frey**

The inherent principles and values of religions are broadly compatible with the values underpinning gender equality and ending family violence. The Australian project mentioned earlier has shown that government is able to work with religious communities and that religious communities can work together across boundaries of language and ethnicity. It has developed a significant number of resources in multiple languages. However, the project has its limitations, including limited funding, recognition of the problem and continued interest from religious communities and their leaders.

Personally, I would appreciate it very much if we could use today's webinar as an inspiration to consider whether cross-religious cooperation in addressing domestic violence and violence against women would be possible and achievable in Europe.

We already have excellent groundwork with all the Australian material that we could use. If you are interested in such a co-operation, please contact us.

**MODERATOR: Dr. Thea Mohr**, EBU, trainer of intercultural communication.

**TRANSLATORS** : Elizabeta Greneron & Sanja Furnadjiska-Adams