

## Equality of Women in Western Tradition



### Western Attitude towards Women

Modern western attitude towards the female gender is a reaction to a long history of subjugation, rooted mainly in Judeo-Christian traditions. Perhaps, more accurately, one can assert that modern attitudes arose in post-reformation philosophies - ideas that appeared during the 'era of enlightenment'. In contrast to this is the Islamic world view, one which finds its basis in the teachings found in the revelation given by God to the Prophet Muhammad. According to Muslims, the view espoused by Islam can be used by humanity during all ages and times; its relevance and benefit is not restricted to a specific period of history, geographic area, or civilization. The issue of women is only one of the topics of contention between these two world views, that of the secular liberal humanist view and the second being Islam. What, after all, is the position and status of women? Can we say that women enjoy a higher status in one culture and oppressed in another?

The West prides itself as a champion women's rights, considering itself to be the protector of women all over the world. Western thinkers are of the position that women in West are progressively receiving more and more rights, while Muslim women are still being suppressed by a medieval religion!

Muslims believe however, that in actuality Islamic ethics provide true freedoms for both men and women alike, and that the West promises a freedom that in reality does not exist, rather only being a modern form of enslavement, packaged in plastic words.

Let us review historically how women were thought of and where they stood in the pyramid of the western tradition. The West sees itself as the intellectual inheritors of the Greco-Roman tradition, and many Western thought can be traced back to the writings of the early Greek philosophers, such as Aristotle and Plato. In reading their works, one will see that their image of women was not one quite favorable. Plato showed his disdain for certain men by comparing them to women. Bertrand Russell once wrote, "*Aristotle maintained that women have fewer teeth than men; although he was twice*

*married, it never occurred to him to verify this statement by examining his wives' mouths.*" [1] Aristotle spoke of the inferiority of women to men being due to the fact that women are essentially bodies without souls and are hence in need of the direction of the souls of males.[2]

The Church fused much of the Greco-Roman philosophies on women.[3] Women were damned to bear the pain of childbirth for her sin of inciting Adam to eat the forbidden fruit (Genesis 2:4-3:24). Women were seen as the source of sin and evil in humans as well as having inherited guilt and guile from the Biblical Eve. The Bible says:

**"I find more bitter than death the woman who is a snare, whose heart is a trap and whose hands are chains. The man who pleases God will escape her, but the sinner she will ensnare... while I was still searching but not finding, I found one upright man among a thousand but not one upright woman among them all."** (Ecclesiastes 7:26-28)

**"No wickedness comes anywhere near the wickedness of a woman... Sin began with a woman and thanks to her we all must die."** (Ecclesiastics 25:19, 24)

Jewish Rabbis listed nine curses inflicted on women as a result of the Fall:

**"To the woman He gave nine curses and death: the burden of the blood of menstruation and the blood of virginity; the burden of pregnancy; the burden of childbirth; the burden of bringing up the children; her head is covered as one in mourning; she pierces her ear like a permanent slave or slave girl who serves her master; she is not to be believed as a witness; and after everything - death."**[4]

To the present day, orthodox Jewish men in their daily morning prayer recite:**"Blessed be God King of the universe that Thou has not made me a woman."**

The women, on the other hand, thank God every morning for: **"making me according to Thy will."**[5]

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#### Footnotes:

[1] 'Impact of Science on Society' (1952) ch. 1, by Bertrand Russell, a British author, mathematician, & philosopher (1872 - 1970).

[2] 'Engendering Origins: Critical Feminist Readings in Plato and Aristotle' by Bat-Ami Bar On; State University of New York Press, 1994, p. 106.

[3] For more details please refer to 'Women In Islam Verses Women In Judeo-Christian Tradition: The Myth & Reality' by Dr. Sherif Abdel Azeem. Most of the following quotations are taken from his work.

[4] Leonard J. Swidler, *Women in Judaism: the Status of Women in Formative Judaism* (Metuchen, N.J: Scarecrow Press, 1976) p. 115.

[5] Thana Kendath, “Memories of an Orthodox youth” in Susannah Heschel, ed. *On being a Jewish Feminist* (New York: Schocken Books, 1983), pp. 96-97.