

# Religion, Culture and Gender Guides



The purpose of the Guides is to showcase the work of Manchester students on the theme of Religion, Culture and Gender in Britain, and to provide creative and critically informed resources on this theme.



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**“How can you teach feminisms and women’s rights within the framework of Christianity, particularly when educating young people about the bible?”**

☞ **Feminisms** – “The advocacy of women's rights on the ground of the equality of the sexes”<sup>1</sup>

☞ **Women’s Rights** – “Rights that promote a position of legal and social equality of women with men”<sup>2</sup>

*“The Bible, precisely because its ideology has been and continues to be so influential in shaping gender roles and expectations in contemporary society, needs to be approached from a feminist perspective.” (Exum, C. J, 1993, P11)*

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<sup>1</sup> **FEMINISM**

**In-text:** (feminism, 2017)

**Your Bibliography:** feminism. (2017). In: *Oxford English Dictionary online*. [online] Available at: <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/feminism> [Accessed 14 Dec. 2017].

<sup>2</sup> **WOMEN'S RIGHTS**

**In-text:** (Women's Rights, 2017)

**Your Bibliography:** Women's Rights. (2017). In: *Oxford English Dictionary online*. [online] Available at: FEMINISM In-text: (feminism, 2017) Your Bibliography: feminism. (2017). In: *Oxford English Dictionary online*. [online] Available at: <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/feminism> [Accessed 14 Dec. 2017]. [Accessed 14 Dec. 2017].

It is undeniable that much of the UK's secular feminist movement would like to reject Christian and Biblical notions on the premise that they are anti-feminist, or even misogynist. Therefore, this guide will show how to intertwine feminisms and the Christian Bible in order to teach young Christians modern feminist ideas whilst maintaining their personal relationship with the Church and God.

### **Where do we start?**

First of all, why is the Bible thought of as being so non-feminist? Clough theorizes that “Over the centuries, scholars, theologians and preachers have sought to draw meaning from biblical texts while inevitably layering them with more contemporary understandings. Thus, not only have the values of ancient societies been regarded throughout the history of the church as authoritative for contemporary Christian living, but in addition the patriarchal assumptions of male interpreters have also been superimposed on ancient texts.” (2017, p87) Therefore, the first point we must raise is that the bible is *extremely old*, and therefore not easily affixed to the modern feminist movement.

### **De-construction and Re-construction**

Because of the Bible's great age, original text cannot be taken at face value. We must examine it contextually; this is where we introduce the idea of de-construction and re-construction. It forms the basis of this guide, and I suggest you take this approach to every aspect of feminism within Christianity and the Bible.

### **Why is De-construction so important?**

Many in our position would like to simply re-interpret the Bible and its teachings, in fact the *Oxford Companion to the Bible* (1993) suggests this is perhaps the only way that Christianity can be feminist: “Alternative [feminist] interpretations of familiar biblical texts have been introduced to show that the texts themselves do not necessarily present a negative view of women, but that biases against women have been attributed to these texts by a long succession of **androcentric** interpreters” (p229) while this appears to work in theory, imagine ten different feminist scholars, from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds giving a feminist re-interpretation of the same Biblical texts and ask yourself and your students “how many of those interpretations would be the same?”

By simply re-interpreting the message we would be reflecting our own subjective views, history and opinions onto whatever message we’re working with; much the same as patriarchal readers influenced the Bible in the first place, and this would leave us, yes, perhaps better off for the time being but it would disadvantage many others; namely anyone else who did not think and feel in exactly the same way that the person who originally re-interpreted the idea does.

Feminism and women’s rights are too vast and contextual to simply be applied to Christianity, however patriarchy is universal (demonstrated in point by ancient patriarchal ideals being applied to Biblical texts still having power and influence today) therefore, we must look at the root of the problem (patriarchy) before trying to solve it; hence de-construction.

(The notion of re-interpretation is also difficult to teach, especially in a group - everyone's reflection on the matter will be somewhat different and lead to inconclusive findings, which can affect the result's legitimacy.)

### **Why is re-construction so important?**

As we are approaching this from not only a feminist, but also a Christian perspective, simply criticizing the patriarchal aspects of Christianity will leave us no better off than we were before. If we simply finished after de-construction we would have exposed the anti-feminist aspect of the Bible, but, with the aim of this guide to be able to teach feminism within the framework of Christianity and the Bible and to create a harmony between a Christian's faith and feminism a further re-construction, removed from patriarchy, is necessary to understand a truer meaning of the Bible's teachings - one without a patriarchal agenda.

### **How can we apply de-construction and re-construction to Biblical ethos when educating young people?**

(Below are some examples of re-construction and de-construction of several areas relating to feminism.)

#### **Gender Roles**

One of the most prevalent and problematic aspects of the Bible is its rigid gendering: male and female. This stems from a common misconception of God as male<sup>3</sup>. As the famous Daly (1973) quote goes “if God is male, then male is God’ ... and therefore female is lesser. Despite the Bible’s use of male pronouns to describe God, it must be stressed that God transcends gender. To suggest that God could be humanized in such a way is essentially blasphemous. The de-construction here lies in recognizing trends set in the Old Testament, translations from Hebrew assign God a male gender due to a language barrier - the use of “El”, translated as ‘He/Him.” Acknowledging that these are used simply because there is no alternative (in Hebrew, everything is binary gendered – male or female) and because at the time of writing a “female” form of God wouldn’t have even been considered, we can then re-construct God in God’s rightful form – as a divine being without gender. If God has no gender, then no gender is God.

When looking at gender roles we must also look at The Book of Genesis:

“So the LORD God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man’s ribs and then closed up the place with flesh.<sup>22</sup> Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man.

<sup>23</sup> The man said,

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<sup>3</sup> Also see: Masculinity.

“This is now bone of my bones  
and flesh of my flesh;  
she shall be called ‘woman,’  
for she was taken out of man.

That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh”

This passage, in its many forms is often taken as proof that there is only man and woman. Unfortunately, the Bible and many other religious texts neglect to mention **intersex** or **trans-gendered** peoples. The reasons for this are many, and debatable and we do not have the time to discuss them in this guide. However, if we are to de-construct and re-construct binary gender in the Bible then we do need to at least acknowledge this fact.

In order to perform a de-construct here I propose that we ask the students to tell us exactly what is happening in this passage, it can be used to support many ideas, however, at face value it tells the story of the creation of human. As Sakenfield (1993) suggests, let us “appeal to the Bible generally...for a critique of patriarchy. This approach is often closely associated with the concerns of **liberation theology** in its search to show that the Bible challenges any viewpoint or action that demeans, limits or controls others because of their race, class or...gender.” (p230) If we

equate the Bible's teachings of equality with what is happening here (creation) we can see that, yes while "she shall be called 'woman' for she was taken out of man" she was still *taken out of man*, all genders are of each other, the same – equal.

### **Bodies and Sexuality**

The Bible's discourse on the body can be viewed in binary terms: holy or sinful. A virginal body is holy, a sexual body is sinful. The only thing that can save a sexual body from sin is the sanctity of marriage. A Christian feminist's empowerment should theoretically be through their religion, and relationship with God. Teaching in a progressive, feminist context the issue of abstinence and (homo)sexuality<sup>4</sup> can be problematic. As previously mentioned, de-construction is so important because it realizes the androcentric and male agenda behind some "teachings" of the Bible; "That [androcentric] agenda was motivated by male fear and desire in response to women's sexuality and the resultant need of patriarchy to control women" (Exum, J. C, 1993) encourage your students to address their own sexuality as just that, their own and God-given, and to understand that sinning is not categorized by which patriarchal figure decided it was so in order to control women.

### **Masculinity**

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<sup>4</sup> Here, I include homo- in brackets because this guide, written from a feminist perspective addresses all sex in the same way.



Maleness and masculinity is not overtly addressed in the Bible, due to its androcentric nature, masculinity is presented as the norm. Much of what drives a Christian **hyper-masculinity** is fear of being perceived as homosexual. De-construction of this follows a similar pattern to what has previously been discussed; this fear is so prevalent because in becoming homosexual one would have been perceived to sacrifice their masculinity, and thus control of women and a place in the patriarchal order. Examine Jesus and the disciples' focus on equality – ask your students if any of those men were afraid to be perceived as not-masculine.

## Glossary of terms

**Androcentric** – male focused.

**Anti-feminist** – Against feminism, actively disagreeing with the rights of women, with the understanding that women are unequal to and lesser than men.

**Binary** – one or the other, composed of just two things. In the case of binary gender: male or female.

**Gender** – different to biological sex, a societal label usually referring to either ‘male’ or ‘female’.

**Hyper-masculinity** (toxic masculinity) – a culture of masculinity powered by patriarchal notions that is damaging to both men and women. Often encompasses the neglect of male emotion and encourages the oppression of women.

**Intersex** – a person whose reproductive organs/genitalia can be classed as both ‘male’ and ‘female’.

**Liberation theology** – a movement within (Christian) theology which addresses social injustice and inequality.

**Masculinity** - (used here in feminist terms) traditional maleness, concerned with men and men’s emotions/value. The stereotypical attributes of men.

**Misogynist** – the idea that men are above women in social order.

**Patriarchal** (or Patriarchy) – a societal system in place universally and throughout history in which men are regarded above women and misogynist and anti-feminist ideas prevail.

**Secular** – non-religious

**Trans-gender(ed)** – a person who transitions from one gender to another.

## **Bibliography**

**Clough, M. (2017). *Shame, the church, and the regulation of female sexuality (Gender, theology and spirituality ; 20)***

This book looks at gendered shame through an androcentric Christian and Catholic lens, exploring how the shaming of the body, particularly that of the female body has been used as a power tool by patriarchy within the church in order to subordinate women; and how this reflects on society up until today. The book's focus on shame relies heavily on criticizing the church.

**Exum, J. C. (1993) *Fragmented Women Feminist (Sub)versions of Biblical Narratives***

This book focuses on de-construction of Bible stories and critically analyzing them from a feminist perspective, then applying feminist ideology to the female characters in these Biblical narratives in order to create a feminist “subversion”. The “subversions” sometimes strayed too far from originals and felt more like a feminist interpretation. The end result was also still very critical of the Bible, and tended to still show the female characters in a negative light (according to the bible).

**Jasper, A. (2015) *Womanspirit Still Rising? Some Feminist Reflections on ‘Religious Education’ in the UK. Feminist Theology, Vol 23, Issue 3, pp. 240-253***

This article is focused on religious education in schools and therefore doesn't focus too much on feminist biblical interpretation, instead spending time on differentiating between ‘spirituality’ and ‘religion’ and what this means in feminist terms.

**Sakenfeld, K. (1993). Feminism and the Bible. *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, The Oxford Companion to the Bible**

This chapter within the encyclopedic volume lists several aspects of feminism within Christianity. It is not analytical, simply stating facts about feminism within the framework of the Bible.

2,080 words.