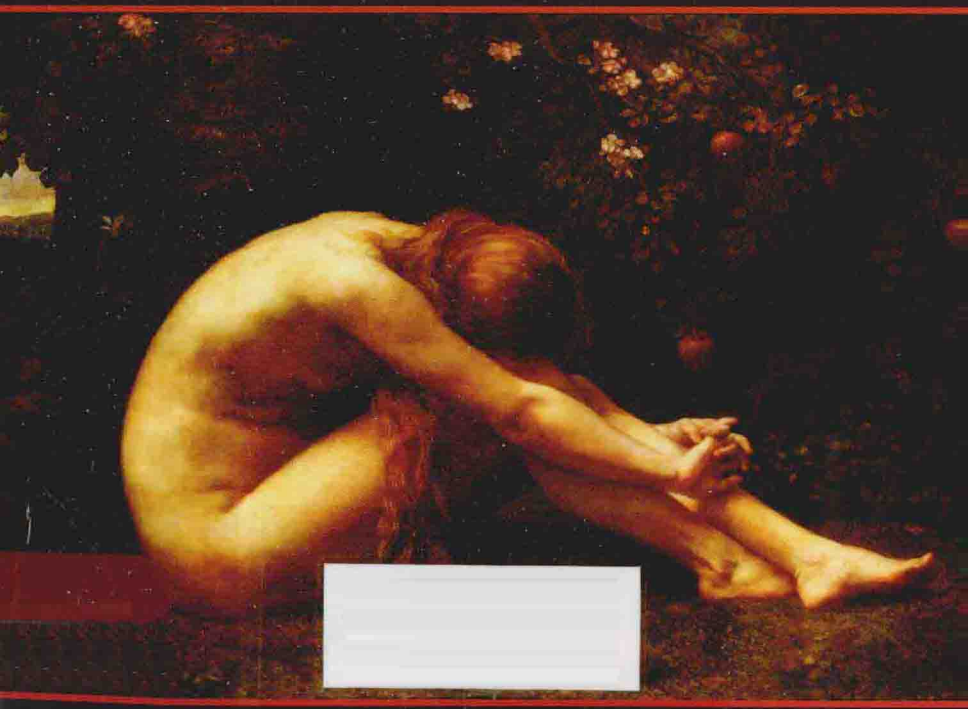
ROUTLEDGE

Man's Dominion

The rise of religion and the eclipse of women's rights



Sheila Jeffreys

MAN'S DOMINION

Religion and the eclipse of women's rights in world politics

Sheila Jeffreys

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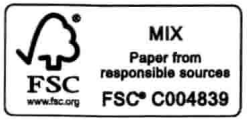

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MAN'S DOMINION

In this feminist critique of the politics of religion, Sheila Jeffreys argues that the renewed rise of religion is harmful to women's human rights. The book seeks to rekindle the criticism of religion as the founding ideology of patriarchy.

Focusing on the three monotheistic religions; Judaism, Christianity and Islam, this book examines common anti-women attitudes such as 'male-headship', impurity of women, the need to control women's bodies, and their modern manifestations in multicultural Western states. It points to the incorporation of religious law into legal systems, faith schools and campaigns led by Christian and Islamic organisations against women's rights at the UN, and explains how religious rights threaten to subvert women's rights. Including highly topical chapters on the burqa and the covering of women, and polygamy, this text questions the ideology of multiculturalism, which shields religion from criticism by demanding respect for culture and faith, while ignoring the harm that women suffer from religion.

Man's Dominion is an incisive and polemic text that will be of interest to students of gender studies, religion and politics.

Sheila Jeffreys is a Professor in the School of Social and Political Sciences at the University of Melbourne. She is the author of *The Industrial Vagina* (2009) and *Beauty and Misogyny* (2005).

This book is dedicated to Ann Rowett, whose love and clear understanding of the issues, as always, have supported me so well in the writing of it.

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ABBREVIATIONS

ACLU	American Civil Liberties Union
AWID	Association for Women's Rights in Development
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women
CPM	Christian Patriarchy Movement
ECOSOC	United Nations Economic and Social Council
ECWR	Egyptian Centre for Women's Rights
EWL	European Women's Lobby
FLDS	Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints
HT	Hizb ut-Tahrir
ICCPR	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
IHEU	International Humanist and Ethical Union
MCB	Muslim Council of Britain
MDG	Millennium Development Goal
MECO	Muslim Education Centre of Oxford
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
OIC	Organisation of the Islamic Conference
UDHR	Universal Declaration of Human Rights
UN	United Nations
UNCHR	United Nations Commission on Human Rights
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
WAF	Women Against Fundamentalism
WCF	World Congress of Families
WLUML	Women Living Under Muslim Laws

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INTRODUCTION

Man's Dominion argues that the domestic and international rise of religion is harmful to women's human rights. I was propelled to write the book by my concern that it was becoming more and more difficult for feminists to criticise religion and point out how much it harms women, at exactly the same time as the increasing political influence of religion was causing serious harms. In the 1970s when I became a feminist in London, atheism was, for most of us, simply an underlying understanding upon which feminist ideas were built. As Dena Attar from the UK states, 'In the early 70s it was possible to believe that religion was in retreat, that feminism could make the great challenge without meeting much of a response' (Attar, 2010, first published 1992, p. 71). Writing in 1992, she says it was no longer possible to hold onto that idea: 'The extent and viciousness of the backlash becomes clearer all the time' (Attar, 2010, p. 72). Attar's concerns are all much more relevant 20 years later. There has been a strong activist feminist response to 'fundamentalism' in countries all over the world, but critical writing and action on religion that is not identified as 'fundamentalist' has been conspicuous by its absence. I argue that the distinction between 'fundamentalism' and 'religion' is problematic, because it can make the latter seem benign, and criticism of it seem churlish, in the face of a pressing emergency. This book is about the three monotheistic religions in general and not just fundamentalism.

Very useful books showing up the misogyny of Christianity were written by feminists who were recovering from their immersion in religious ideology in the 1970s and 1980s, particularly Mary Daly's very significant, *Beyond God the Father* (Daly, 1985b) I paid little attention to these books at the time because I considered, like other progressive

intellectuals, that religion would die out. When I read Daly's work today it seems very brave, because the idea that religion must be challenged, rather than 'respected', has come to be seen as rather offensive in multicultural societies and in communities dominated by the 'politics of difference'. I have written this book in order to recover lost ground, to assert once more that which generations of feminist activists and theorists have thought too obvious to mention: that all religions were invented in historical situations where women were radically subordinate to men, and reflect their odious origins in their ideas and practices. I aim to open up the space for debate once more so that feminists may criticise religion without feeling under pressure to show 'respect'.

I am keenly aware that a right-wing movement is developing in Europe at the time of writing this book, which targets Muslims. This makes the task of writing a critique of religion much more controversial. Extreme right-wing, anti-immigrant movements are emerging in Germany, France, the Netherlands and Sweden. In Sweden, a far-right party, the Swedish Democrats, entered parliament for the first time in September 2010, winning 20 of the 349 seats; and a gunman who targeted people with immigrant backgrounds and was believed to have killed one and attempted to murder seven others, was arrested in Sweden in November (Telegraph, 2010). In Norway the gunman Anders Breivik massacred young people at a youth camp in July 2011 in order to register his protest at the 'Islamisation' of Europe (Hedghammer, 2011). In the UK, the English Defence League is conducting a campaign against the 'Islamification' of British cities (Townsend, 2010). Right-wing organisations rail against sharia law, for instance, which is a topic that this book discusses. The fact that racist groups exploit some of the issues that are of great concern to feminist critics of religion must not be allowed to prevent the development of the critique. But it does explain why there is some reluctance, particularly on the Left, to have any truck with the feminist concerns that form the subject matter of this book. Activists surveyed for a 2010 Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID) report on fundamentalism and women's rights, said that 'any criticism of fundamentalism within a particular community (whether by insiders or outsiders) can feed into racist stereotyping of the community by right-wing groups' (Balchin, 2010, p. 108). Nira Yuval-Davis commented in the report, 'Because people are afraid to be racist then they accept this multi-faithism which fundamentalists then utilize'

(Balchin, 2010, p. 108). It is important, nonetheless, to create a space in which the feminist critique can be developed despite the fact that, in the current charged atmosphere, accusations of racism are, and will continue to be, levelled at critics of religion.

Definition of religion

The definition of religion I use in this book is that offered by Anthony Giddens, 'A set of beliefs adhered to by the members of a community, involving symbols regarded with a sense of awe or wonder, together with ritual practices in which members of the community engage' (Giddens, 1997, p. 584). Giddens rightly points out that 'Religions are clearly influenced by culture, and the sort of religions taken up by societies are likely to relate to the prevailing context which makes some more attractive than others' (Giddens, 1997, p. 584). This book starts from the understanding that religion is socially constructed and produced by culture. Revelations come from nowhere more mysterious than the interests of the dominant groups within particular cultures at particular times. This explains the ubiquity of anti-woman ideologies in cultures of thoroughgoing male domination. This book will be mainly concerned with the three monotheistic religions of Judaism, Islam and Christianity, which are very similar in their attitudes towards women. They all developed in the same cultural crucible in the Middle East (Lerner, 1987). The prevailing culture around them was deeply patriarchal. As these religions expanded into different cultural contexts they were influenced by these new cultures, so that the costume rules for Muslim women are affected by the culture in which they live, for instance, rather than simply by the religion. The three religions all derive from deeply patriarchal roots and incorporate similar norms about women, such as women's innate subordination and the need for obedience to their husbands; the notion of 'honour' and 'shame'; and the idea that women's bodies represent sin and evil. Ideas about women's sexuality and the need to control it are similar in these religions but are modified according to the particular cultural contexts in which they are practised.

I will only consider the three monotheistic religions here, although feminist theorists and activists against religious fundamentalism argue that there are versions of fundamentalism in all the main religions in the world, not just the three from the Middle East, but in Hinduism, Buddhism

and Sikhism too. They write about the way in which a newly political Hinduism in India is mobilised by organisations such as Shiv Sena (Nussbaum, 2007), and the political party the BJP, in ways that mandate a narrow and subordinate role for women, and argue that this needs to be included in the fundamentalism that feminists oppose. There are arguments that in Sri Lanka, Buddhism is being directly politicised in ways that suit the non-Tamil Sinhalese majority (Khuankaew, 2008). The forms of women's subordination found in these religions, and the threat posed to women's interests as these religions develop newly politicised versions, are outside the scope of this book.

There is a greater coverage of Islam than the other monotheistic religions here. I am aware that this may be seen as 'Islamophobic' because, as indeed I argue here, all religions are dangerous to women's rights, so why should Islam be singled out. Judaism and Christianity are included in most of the chapters of this book, their founding texts are examined, their fundamentalist versions are scrutinised for their agenda on women, their access to government funding, particularly for faith schools, is problematised, and their involvement in campaigning against women's rights is described. But there is more coverage of Islam, and two chapters – on the covering of women and on Islamic feminism – are restricted to consideration of Islam. The reasons for this do not include any idea that Islam is essentially more problematic for women than the other two religions that were its progenitors. Where there is more attention to Islam in this book it is because the topics being discussed, such as incorporation of religious law into Western legal systems, or the campaign to cover up women and girls, are being promoted particularly strongly in the present by some Islamic organisations.

The Atheist 'movement'

At the present time there is a growing atheist movement worldwide, which is responding to the rise of religion, but this is not a movement that takes much notice of women's interests. It is inspired by the work of men such as Richard Dawkins (2006), Sam Harris (2005) and Christopher Hitchens (2008), who take a rationalist perspective towards religion. These men argue that god does not exist, and use rationalist argument and scientific ideas to prove that no idea of god is needed to explain the world. But feminists have been quite suspicious of both the rationality that male thinkers make claim to, and the scientific objectivity

which pretends to truths that are often socially constructed, e.g. that women are naturally different in their mindsets and avocations from men (Harding, 1986). Dawkins' scientific triumphalism fails to appeal – and most of the time seems to be stating the obvious – to feminists whose concerns about religion are not whether god exists, but the fact that religions promote misogyny, and truncate women's opportunities, in countries throughout the world. The way in which Dawkins writes, asserting a superior rationality against the foolishness of those who are easily deceived, could be seen as representing a *hypervirility*. Masculine rationality distinguishes his writing from the behaviour of women, since it is women who have most often been associated with the subjective and emotional spheres, and are likely to be over-represented in churchgoing in Christian religions in the West. Though I hope that this book will contribute a feminist perspective for those involved in the atheist movement who are prepared to include the issue of women's equality in their ruminations, it is not directed to the 'new' atheists so much as to all those concerned with women's rights, who have felt that they should curb their fury so as not to offend and be disrespectful to religion. Disrespect is crucial. Disrespect for the cultures, values and institutions of male domination is the very foundation and *sine qua non* of feminism. Since religion is crucial to the construction of cultural norms in every culture, disrespect for it should be the natural amniotic fluid of feminist thought and activism.

The misogyny of religion

The feminist critique of the way that religions think about and treat women has been profound. Feminist criticism of religion as harmful to women was powerfully expressed in the 1970s, usually in relation to Christianity (Daly, 1985b). Feminist activists and theorists have pointed out the many ways in which Christian religious organisations, as well as those of other faiths, are harmful to women's human rights. From the 1980s onwards these criticisms were extended to Judaism and Islam and feminists have argued that religion is foundational to the ideology of women's inferiority in all patriarchal systems (El Saadawi, 2007). Religion gives authority to traditional, patriarchal beliefs about the essentially subordinate nature of women and their naturally separate roles, such as the need for women to be confined to the private world of the home and family, that women should be obedient to their husbands,

that women's sexuality should be modest and under the control of their menfolk, and that women should not use contraception or abortion to limit their childbearing. The practice of such ancient beliefs interferes profoundly with women's abilities to exercise their human rights. Feminist human rights theorist, Courtney Howland, for instance, points out that two elements common to the precepts of organised religions in relation to women – the requirement of women's obedience to their husbands and the modesty rule – chill women's political expression (Howland, 1999). These precepts place an absolute limit on the ability of women in some religious communities to express their opinions, exit their houses, exercise voting rights and engage in any activities where men are present. In this book I shall examine the womanhating attitudes common to the monotheistic religions, and the ways in which they have become the basis of men's rule in religious communities in Western multicultural states, forming the basis of a campaign against women's rights as human rights through the United Nations.

The rise of religion

This book is written in response to the rise of religion. Considering the misogyny that lies at the root of the monotheistic religions, it is impossible for feminists to be sanguine about this phenomenon. This rise has taken Western intellectuals by surprise. The important sociologist of religion, Peter Berger, explains that, like most sociologists until the 1980s, he assumed that modernisation and secularisation would go hand in hand, but now admits, 'The world today is massively religious, and is anything but the secularized world that had been predicted' (Berger, 1999, p. 8). Many other scholars support the idea that religion is on the rise and seek to explain it (Eagleton, 2009). But these commentators give little attention to the implications of this rise for women.

A 2010 issue of the journal *Third World Quarterly*, dedicated to, as the introduction describes it, the effect of 'The Unhappy Marriage of Religion and Politics' on women's equality, covers a variety of ways in which there is a 'rising political prominence of religious actors and movements' (Razavi and Jenichen, 2010, p. 833). The editors explain that in a wide variety of states, political parties and elites have been making alliances with religious leaders in order to garner their votes and shore up their rule. Israel and India are given as examples of this, but the same process has been taking place in countries like the UK and Australia

too, in what I call the 'gentlemen's agreement', in which particular groups of patriarchs are handed control over women and children, or even able to get their religious prejudices respected in civil law on issues of crucial importance to women, such as abortion and sexuality. In ethnic nationalist movements, religion has been harnessed to bolster the legitimacy of political leaders – even in Serbia by Milosevic, who was an atheist. Religion has been used to bolster authoritarian regimes, as in Iran and Pakistan, where Islamisation projects have imposed 'an anti-democratic, discriminatory and misogynistic template on society' (Razavi and Jenichen, 2010, p. 841). Democratisation has created the paradox that religious political parties have been able to secure power in states such as Turkey, which has led to the spread of conservative attitudes towards women in both political and civil society. In all of these examples it is a woman's right to control her own body and sexuality, and her right to equality in the 'private' sphere of the family that has been sacrificed as alliances and compromises have been made between patriarchs. In this book I am unable to do justice to developments in individual states such as Pakistan, Turkey, Poland and Nigeria, all of which have been subjected to detailed analysis in relation to the rise of religion and the sacrifice of women's equality elsewhere (Arat, 2010; Pereira and Ibrahim, 2010; Shaheed, 2010). Rather, I have chosen to concentrate on the implications for women of the rise of religion in multicultural societies in the West, through the fertile ground offered by multiculturalist ideas, for instance, and the process of desecularisation.

Multicultural ideology provides support for the development of private religious fiefdoms in which women and girls are subordinated beyond the reach of the state, because it calls for the 'respect' of culture and religion. Respect for religion fosters desecularisation, the process in which states enlist religions in policy formation and delivery, despite the harm to women, girls, lesbians and gay men that are likely to be fostered thereby. Desecularisation is evident in the UK and in Australia, where heads of state such as Tony Blair, John Howard and Kevin Rudd have proclaimed their religious faith and its importance to their policymaking, in ways unthinkable little more than a decade ago (Warhurst, 2006). They have been concerned to propitiate what they perceive as increasingly influential religious minorities in nations in which the religious observance of the citizenry continues to decline. The vaunting of religion has facilitated the implementation of neo-liberal policies of privatisation of state services, and the involvement of 'faith communities'

in taking over state responsibilities, inspired by social capital and communitarian ideas. In this process, important areas of state provision, such as education and welfare services, have been outsourced to religious organisations. This has taken place at considerable speed in the UK and Australia from the late mid-1990s onwards.

Religion, women's human rights and equality

This book uses a human rights framework, where this is appropriate, to examine the harm that women suffer from religion. This is a necessary correction, because religious patriarchs are increasingly using rights talk to defend their subordination of women and girls. They justify the harms through the 'right to religion'. Fundamentalist Christian, Mormon and Muslim organisations are using human rights language, such as the need to defend the 'natural family', in United Nations fora in order to turn back the gains made by the movement for women's rights as human rights. Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) contains a right to 'Freedom to manifest one's religion or beliefs' but this is tempered by 'such limitations as are . . . necessary to protect . . . the fundamental rights and freedoms of others' (United Nations, 1966). The 'right to religion' therefore may not trample women's 'rights and freedoms'. The language of human rights is important to the international conversation over women's freedom. I assume in this book the usefulness of women's rights as human rights arguments. I will not rehearse all the discussion in feminist and human rights theory as to the effectiveness or appropriateness of using rights talk (Jeffreys, 1997). Women's human rights activists in countries throughout the world are using rights language to raise issues and to delineate harms, and it is this practice that I shall employ in this book.

The understanding of women's equality that I use is one of transformative equality. The 1979 'Women's Convention', the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), is based upon the notion of equality between men and women. This equality approach has been criticised as assuming a male norm, since it is men that women should be 'equal' to (Fudge, 1989). Men's freedoms, however, are created prior to, and out of, women's subordination, and need to be curtailed if women are to be 'equal' (Pateman, 1988). Men have privileges that enable them to understand 'work' as a paid workday outside the home, because they are generally

serviced by the unpaid, and unrecognised work of women (Jeffreys, 2012, forthcoming). Men's 'sexual rights' assume women's compliance with being objects for use, with no concern for women's sexual personhood (Oriel, 2005). Women cannot be 'equal' in these respects (MacKinnon, 1989). Transformative equality does not reduce women to seeking the right to be 'equal' to men, but requires a transformation of the relations between men and women. In this understanding men will lose the privileges that they have gained at the expense of women. I argue in this book that the rise of 'fundamentalism' should be understood as a backlash by patriarchs against this potential loss of privileges, and a campaign to maintain them. The public/private split common to political and legal theory and practice, in which rights are understood as belonging to the public realm, and exclude women's private exploitation and relations of slavery, must cease to exist in transformative equality (Howland, 1999; Cook, 2006). The public and the private realms are understood as indissoluble. I will argue in this book that the rhetoric of religious patriarchs seeks to maintain the 'private' as removed from state interference so that they may subordinate their wives and children according to their own lights. For women to participate in the public realm, the state must be prepared to intervene and alleviate the harms they suffer in the private fiefdoms that are created in fundamentalist versions of religion. Despite the shortcomings of CEDAW, it, and other rights instruments, have an educational and persuasive power that is important to feminist struggle.

A gentlemen's agreement

One of the themes of *Man's Dominion* is the policy of appeasement that has become the dominant response by political actors in the West, particularly those on the Left, to religious political activism. I shall argue that the tolerance of the harms that religions inflict upon women and girls in Western multicultural states is based upon a 'gentlemen's agreement'. This term was the title of a 1947 film about anti-Semitism in the US in which Gregory Peck plays a reporter who goes undercover to reveal 'genteel' anti-Semitism in country clubs and hiring practices, and anti-Jewish quotas. These practices were covert. In the gentlemen's agreement covered in this book they are not. The subordination of women is very clear in matters such as hiring practices, entry to buildings, segregated events, in many religious organisations all over the world, including all