

# Gender

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## WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you'll look at notions of gender in several religions. You'll see that gender construction and priority apply not only to the content of religion but also to the form of expression of tradition. This lesson uses examples from several religions, paying particular attention to the relationship between gender and authority. You'll be getting a better idea of how men and women participate in religious life in several of the traditions. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. Leadership
2. Sex Segregation
3. The Third Gender

## 1. Leadership

The perception of the roles of men and women in religious life has been known to shift and change over the years. This has not affected only religious organizations from within. It has also influenced the institutions of government and education. Gender and religion are also related to notions about the nature of God, gods, and deity in general. Many traditions have cosmologies and creation myths that are very gender-specific.

As far as who's allowed to teach and transmit the material of religion and lead a religious community, there's a fairly broad range of what is accepted and what is not accepted. In Roman Catholicism, women are not ordained to the priesthood. In Islam also, religious leadership is almost always restricted to males. So while Imams, or religious leaders in Islam, have traditionally been male, this is changing a bit. In spite of the controversy over female leadership, there are situations where **women as imams** have led all-female, and even sometimes mixed-gender prayer services.

In Christianity, that is shifting as well. Many branches of Protestantism, which is a major branch of Christianity, allow women in leadership roles. They have the right to be ordained as priests, ministers, and other important positions of authority and positions of guidance and support. The Roman Catholic church has recently opened the door to the possibility of **ordination of women**, that women might eventually be allowed to become deacons. This is a position of service and support to the priest or the leader and authority of a particular church.

The history of female deacons traces back to the first centuries of Christianity with references to passages in the New Testament. For those who believe that there has historically been a legitimate place for women in the diaconate, the first book of Timothy is cited: “one that rules well his own house, having his children in subjection with all gravity,” and “even so, must their wives be grave, not slanderers, sober, faithful in all things. Let the deacons be the husbands of one wife, ruling their children and their own house as well.”



#### DID YOU KNOW

There are differing opinions and perspectives on this. In defense of restricting leadership to men, the chapter before in the first book of Timothy is often cited: “But I suffer not a woman to teach nor to usurp authority over the men, but to be in silence.”

There are female religious leaders, called rabbis, in three branches of Judaism: Reform, Reconstructionist, and some schools of Conservative Judaism. In American Reform Judaism, the first woman was ordained as a rabbi in the 1970s, and some Conservative Jewish seminaries also began ordaining women in the 1980s.

Although it is relatively small, Reconstructionist Judaism has been influential. It places a high value on equality in all its forms. From the very beginning, they have ordained women to be rabbis—leaders of their religious communities. This branch of Judaism has also recognized patrilineal descent in determining who can be considered Jewish. Traditionally, Judaism only recognized matrilineal descent, but Reconstructionist Judaism has a value of equality that recognizes patrilineal descent as well.



#### TERMS TO KNOW

##### Women as Imams

In Islam, women serving in positions of religious leadership.

##### Ordination of Women

The admission of women into Holy Orders or other significant positions of religious leadership.

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## 2. Sex Segregation

**Sex segregation** has traditionally been practiced and recognized in many religions. There are countless references to the value and the meaning of this in almost all the sacred texts.

In Orthodox Judaism, there has traditionally been a strict adherence to separating the sexes during certain services of prayer and worship. This is called the **Mechitza**. It's a barrier and a separation. Its traditional purpose has been to ensure modesty and good attention.



#### TERMS TO KNOW

##### Sex Segregation

The practice in some religions of separating men and women during worship.

##### Mechitza

A partition separating women and men during religious proceedings in the Jewish tradition.

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### 3. The Third Gender

In Hinduism, the concept of a third gender or non-binary identity has historical and cultural roots. The term often used to describe the third gender in Hinduism is "Hijra," though it's important to note that this term is more commonly associated with the transgender community in South Asia, and not exclusively within Hinduism. The recognition of a third gender in Hinduism can be traced back to ancient texts and scriptures. The Vedas, which are among the oldest sacred texts of Hinduism, acknowledge the existence of individuals who do not fit the conventional binary gender categories. For example, the Rig Veda mentions the term "tritiya prakriti," which can be translated as "third nature" or "third gender."

In Hindu mythology, there are also instances where gods and goddesses manifest in non-binary or androgynous forms. Ardhanarishvara, a composite form of the god Shiva and his consort Parvati, represents the union of male and female energies in a single form, symbolizing the inseparable nature of masculine and feminine aspects.

While Hinduism has a rich history of acknowledging non-binary gender identities, societal attitudes and acceptance have varied over time and across different regions. In contemporary times, there are still challenges and discrimination faced by individuals who identify outside the traditional binary gender norms. However, there are efforts to promote inclusivity and understanding within Hindu communities.

Views on gender and sexuality can vary widely within Hinduism, and there isn't a single, unified perspective on these matters. Additionally, societal attitudes and interpretations of religious texts play a significant role in shaping the acceptance of diverse gender identities within Hindu communities.



#### SUMMARY

Most religions have their own views on gender roles. While some attitudes toward gender and religion have been known to shift, some religions maintain traditional **sex segregation** during certain services. **Leadership** roles for men and women can differ in different religions. Reform, Reconstructionist, and Conservative Judaism, as well as certain denominations of Protestantism, ordain women to leadership positions. Roman Catholicism and Islam have traditionally functioned under only male leadership, but in Islam, some women have led all-women and even mixed-gender prayer services. In Roman Catholicism, the church has begun to officially discuss the possibility that women could be ordained into the diaconate. Hinduism is one religion with respect for gender-nonconforming people with a **third gender** or "Hijra," though the acceptance of transgender and nonbinary people in India varies by region. The Hijra concept is embraced by other transgender communities in Asia.

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The admission of women into Holy Orders or other significant positions of religious leadership.

**Sex Segregation**

The practice in some religions of separating men and women during worship.

**Women as Imams**

In Islam, women serving in positions of religious leadership.