

What if holy books were written by women?



Highland Views

Chris Highland

"All talk about God staggers under impossible difficulties."

—Karen Armstrong, "A History of God"

When a professional god-talker (theologian) says something like this, we know we're wandering in the wilderness.

What is it about humans that we try so hard to define the undefinable and explain the unexplainable and then build religions upon those "impossible difficulties"?

Why is it that people can still hold so tight to ancient, obsolete images of the divine? After many years of thinking about these things, I'm dumbfounded that some can't even consider that God, if there is one, may not look at all the way he — or she — has been imagined for thousands of years.

Take the image of God as female. Hindus and pagans have no problem with this. How a person reacts or responds to that suggestion says a lot about them. It doesn't seem unreasonable that a whole lot of misogyny seems to arise from refusal to accept the notion or even consider the possibility.

All the way back in my (yes) liberal

and (yes) California seminary (what I sometimes refer to as my "theological cemetery"), I learned that language matters. What a revelation! If people are told over and over, year after year, since childhood, that the Creator of the Universe is male, that He chose to become a male human, that all of their Savior's disciples were male, that the entirety of the holy scriptures were written by men and that for thousands of years all ordained clergy were men ... is it any wonder that people view God as a man?

Like so many other theological issues, people default to the holy books which were, we remember, all written by men (if they weren't, that fact has been conveniently lost). Many people of faith, especially among the clergy, will respond to this whole subject with, "The Bible says..." There is no other reason offered, except maybe that these folks just think it's better to have men in charge, especially when it comes to important sacred matters. Yet, where did that prejudice come from? Religious upbringing.

So let's consider what might be different in the world of faith if women had indeed written the holy books.

What if Adam gave the forbidden fruit to Eve? What if Zipporah climbed Sinai instead of Moses? What if we read of Queen Davina instead of King David? Moving along the biblical story

line, what if it wasn't Jesus but Jessica who became God incarnate, and the disciples were mostly women?

What if it wasn't Paul but Pauline who wrote most of the Christian scriptures and she instructed believers to obey women clergy and men to be obedient to their wives?

There's another way this could go, of course. In place of these opposing views, say there was a fairer balance between women and men, female and male.

And there's one more turn this could take. What if God did not fall silent centuries ago and brought a new revelation that from now on believers should speak to Him as a Her half the time and treat genders equally?

So, what if God Himself was not a Himself at all, but a Herself? How is it that seems so radical, even revolutionary — in 2018?

Ironically, Karen Armstrong begins her book on God with this puzzling line: "We have to decide whether the word 'God' has any meaning for us today." Somewhere in that process of decision we either define what we mean by God or we leave it vague. Either way, in my opinion, there is not much left to say. We're left with silence, which is probably wise.

In "The Woman's Bible," edited by a committee of women and published in 1895, Elizabeth Cady Stanton asked, "If

a Heavenly Father was necessary, why not a Heavenly Mother?" In her comments on Genesis she wonders if Eve and Adam, both made in God's image and both parents of the human race, would have fared better if they were able to get some helpful parental "advice from the Heavenly Mother and Father."

This kind of reasonable (and heretical) thinking arises when excluded voices and fearless minds find the courage to present new questions of these "divine mysteries."

Eleanor Roosevelt wrote: "The new frontier today ... is the frontier of [our] minds. But we cannot cast an enduring light on other minds unless the light in our own minds burns with a hard, unquenchable flame" ("The American Dream").

Who knows what religion, what the Bible, what other holy scriptures and traditions would look like if women had written these stories, with a female divinity? Maybe we wouldn't have so many impossible difficulties and it would all make more sense. Who knows?

Chris Highland served as a Protestant minister and interfaith chaplain for nearly 30 years. He is a teacher, writer, free-thinker and humanist celebrant. Chris and his wife, Carol, a Presbyterian minister, live in Asheville. Learn more at chighland.com