

# Christianity-Informed Patriarchy in the United States as a System of Oppression

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**Abstract:** Christianity is the dominant religion in the United States of America and is often cited in debate surrounding legislation that largely impacts women and the queer community. However, modern Christianity in America falls short of the example of the tradition's namesake and scripture is often misinterpreted or mistranslated in order to support one's political position. By examining some common misinterpretations, as well as some basic assumptions that the Christian Bible presents and how they manifest in modern society, this paper briefly examines Christianity's role in the American patriarchy, which functions as a system of oppression that keeps white Christian males in disproportionate power.

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In the United States of America, the misinterpretation and manipulation of Christian scripture has informed and perpetuated the patriarchy as a system of oppression. While the original teachings of Jesus of Nazareth are rooted in love, kinship, and even socialism, the Bible has long been used in the United States to oppress women, Indigenous Americans, and the queer community. The patriarchy's influence is wide, and even goes so far as to gaslight women into abandoning belief in their own right to self-determination in favor of submission to male figures, all in the name of God. This system of oppression harms not only those who are oppressed, but also the oppressors by thrusting unsustainable gender roles upon them and depriving all of society of the full potential for contribution of those who exist under oppression. The principles behind feminism and earth-centered spiritual traditions present a more equitable alternative to Christianity-informed patriarchal structures.

It is important to note that the Bible has been translated dozens of times from the original Greek. The text was composed between 1200 BCE and 100 CE by multiple authors and remains the subject of much debate today (BBC). Interpretation is subjective and depends largely on the cultural context of the original text and that of the time of translation, the linguistic and theological knowledge of the translator, the political agenda of the person or company funding the translation, whether the person interpreting it, if Christian, is Catholic or

Protestant, and many more factors. All of this is to say that the complexity and nuances of Biblical interpretation cannot be comprehensively analyzed for the purposes of this project. As such, discussion about the Bible and Christianity in this context will not be through a scholarly theological lens, but a social and political one. The purpose of this project is to demonstrate how cultural ideas rooted in Christianity relate to American politics, and how those particular ideas contribute to wider systems of oppression against minorities, namely women and the queer community.

The Christian Bible is separated into two parts: The Old and New Testaments. The Old Testament is the original Hebrew Bible. It includes the story of Eve and Adam, as well as stories of Moses and the Torah, God's revelations to him. *Torah* is commonly translated as *law* but more accurately translated as *guidance* or *instruction* (BBC). The Old Testament is where the concept of complementarianism first arose in the Bible, and also where passages commonly cited in Biblical arguments against queer rights can be found.

According to the Old Testament, in the beginning, there was only God, who then created earth, life, and humankind. The first person was Adam, a man made from the dust of the earth in God's image. From Adam's rib, God then made Eve, Adam's wife and companion (Genesis 1-3:25). Eve is known to be Adam's second wife in the Jewish tradition. Hebrew texts speak of Lilith, Adam's first wife, who was likewise made from the dust of the earth in God's image. The Jewish myth claims that Lilith fled Eden because she was unwilling to submit to Adam socially or sexually. According to the Jewish Women's Archive, Lilith appears in the Christian Bible once in Isaiah 34:14, where she is portrayed briefly as a demon, in line with other myths surrounding her existence and departure from Eden (Lesses).

Lilith's fall from *wife of and equal to Adam* to *demon* is telling of Biblical attitudes towards women, which are also present in Eve's story. Though Lilith was created as Adam's equal, she was literally demonized for refusing to submit to him. Lilith goes on to be a demon who threatens newborn children, and it was common for parents to shield their infants from Lilith with protective amulets. (Lesses) More than only becoming a demon after refusing to submit to Adam, Lilith became a lethal threat to children, which naturally caused other women to fear her, and also anything associated with her. The association between Lilith's rebellion to submission and threat to one's children may be illogical but is also an understandable case of simple psychological conditioning.

The formation of Eve from Adam's rib is the first example of complementarianism in the Bible. *Complementarianism* is the theory that the Bible declares that men and women are equal in worth, but separate in role and function, especially in the family and the church. In this system, men are meant to be the leaders of the church and family and women submissive to them. Women are expected to care for the home and children and accept men's authority without question or complaint (Roat). This system creates strict binary gender castes and is inherently transphobic.

More than only casting women as submissive, the story of the events in the Garden of Eden cast women as responsible for the fall of and inherent sinful nature of humankind. Eve, in succumbing to the temptation to eat fruit from the tree of knowledge, condemned women to pain in childbirth and men, because Adam followed Eve's example, were condemned to the demanding physical labor of producing food through agriculture. Upon their fall from grace, Eve

and Adam also noticed their state of nakedness, and covered their bodies for the first time (Genesis 3:16-19).

The Eve and Adam story has been interpreted in many ways. Some Christian fundamentalists believe it as a literal explanation of creation and the nature of mankind. Other Christians believe it is a symbolic lesson in morals, much like a fable. Some historians and religious scholars note the parallels between Eve's experience in the Garden of Eden and stories of ancient goddesses of Sumer, Babylon, and Egypt, including Isis and Ishtar. Shawna Dolansky notes that many of these stories feature a woman in an Eden-type environment, a tree or fruit bearing knowledge, and even a serpent, but the difference is that Eve's is the only story where women are punished and villainized (Dolansky). In the Bible story, Eve is to blame for the fall of man because she disobeyed the word of God. As Eve is the Biblical mother of all humankind, her sin is inherited by her children. This sets the stage to ultimately deny women autonomy and freedom, because if they are anything like Eve, women cannot be trusted.

This interpretation is one of many, much like that of verses that discuss homosexuality. Leviticus 18:22 is most notably cited in discussions about Christian positions on homosexuality:

"Thou shalt not lie with mankind, as with womankind: this is abomination." (King James Version)

"Do not lie with man as one lies with a woman; that is detestable." (New International Version) (Zonderfan)

In these modern English versions, the sentiment seems straightforward. However, as Bible scholar and researcher Ed Oxford demonstrates, these translations are far removed from

the original Hebrew text by centuries of time and context. Oxford and a team of Biblical scholars researched Biblical language by collecting and translating Bibles in many languages. He found that the term now translated to mean *man* or *mankind* in this verse (*arsenokoitai*) is more accurately translated as *young boys*. Oxford claims that the original text condemned pedophilia, not homosexuality. In fact, Oxford discovered that the word *homosexual* does not appear in a Biblical text until a 1983 German translation. A Swedish Bible also suggests *boy abusers* is a more accurate translation of the original Greek (Oxford).

The 1983 German translation was funded by an American company, Biblica. Oxford suggests that the true “gay agenda” was Biblica’s influence on the inclusion of the word *homosexual* in the translation, and implied that they were influenced by the growing gay rights movement, which began with the Stonewall Riots of 1969 (Oxford). Though queer representation was certainly not the status quo at the time, queerness was not Biblically condemned until the 1983 German translation, by which time the gay rights movement was well underway.

Part of what separates Jews from Christians is that while the Jewish tradition claims the Old Testament as part of their scripture, they do not do the same for the New Testament. The New Testament tells the story of Jesus of Nazareth, the Christian prophet. While Jesus himself was Jewish, Jewish people do not believe him to be a prophet. Jesus was reportedly the son of God immaculately conceived and born of a virgin, and his birth is celebrated by Christians on Christmas, December 25<sup>th</sup>. Like many other Christian holidays, modern-day Christmas is an adaptation of an earlier festival. In this case, Christmas is an adaptation of *Saturnalia*, an ancient Roman festival celebrating the god Saturn. December 25<sup>th</sup> was the Winter Solstice in

the Julian calendar (Encyclopedia Britannica). In addition to Jesus, Elaanie Stormbender cites “thirty-two other stories of virgin births in ancient cultures, and several with mythologies quite similar to that of Jesus” in *The Witch’s Journey* (Stormbender 86).

*Christian* means “little Christ,” or one who seeks to live like Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus was reported to flip over tables of money-changers doing business in temples (Matthew 21:12), commanded his followers to gouge out their own eyes or cut off their own hands if they are tempted to look at or touch a woman lustfully (Mark 5:29), and suggested that the rich give their wealth away to the poor. (Matthew 19:21) While some of these passages are unpopular, one of Jesus’s most well-known statements is demonstrated in John 13:34-35:

“A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another.” (King James Version)

“A new commandment I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know you are my disciples, if you love one another.” (New International Version) (Zonderfan 2740-2741)

Here, Jesus of Nazareth, warning his disciples of his impending death during what would come to be known as *the Last Supper*, sets forth a new commandment. Though the exact wording of this verse varies slightly between versions, and there are several versions in existence, the message remains steadfast: *love one another*. Some Christians regard this commandment as a new covenant that supersedes any Old Testament laws, and others interpret it as a complement those laws, instructing followers that obeying Old Testament laws



is an act of Christlike love. Soon after this new commandment, Jesus was sentenced to death by crucifixion. Christians believe that through his martyrdom, Jesus purchased forgiveness for the sins of mankind, including the original sins of Eve and Adam.

The cultural influence of the Christ story and archetype prevails today, though many Christians fall woefully short of Christ's example. Those in power, disproportionately white male Christians, choose to use social and political power and Biblical verses as justification for perpetuating systemic oppression, often without proper consideration of context, instead of supporting the radical justice that Jesus advocated for. The implications of the Eve story, that women are to blame for humankind's suffering and should not be trusted, also fuel support of complementarian structures, even in secular society. The ideas of the story persist today with messages from the legal system that say women cannot be trusted to make decisions for their own bodies, from the media that say women are too emotional or untrustworthy to hold powerful government positions, and the perpetuation of misinterpretation as feminism being radical and anti-male. In the United States' government, this is especially apparent in the ongoing obsessive legislation of women's bodies, the lack of female representation in legislature, and discrimination against queer Americans thinly veiled as religious freedom.

According to the American Center for Women and Politics, 23.6% of the United States Congress is presently female (Center for American Women and Politics), despite women making up roughly half of the US population. Women presently account for 1/3 of sitting Supreme Court justices and have yet to break into the Executive Branch of US government. This trend of underrepresentation is present at every level of lawmaking. Average representation of women in legislature does not exceed 30% in any federal, state, or local capacity. State legislatures

boast the highest rate of representation, with women occupying 2137 of 7383 seats, or 28.9%. (Center for American Women and Politics). Additionally, the Pew Research Center reports that 88.2% of Congress is presently Christian, despite Christians making up only 71% of the population (Pew Research Center). Considering deeply ingrained beliefs regarding complementarianism and widespread misunderstanding of Biblical statements on homosexuality, what can one expect from disproportionately Christian, male lawmakers when it comes to laws that impact their female and queer constituents?

One of the patriarchy's ongoing attacks on women<sup>1</sup> is the attack on bodily autonomy through legislating abortion, most currently the disturbing trend of restrictive abortion bans. Abortion was made legal in the United States by the 1973 Supreme Court ruling in *Roe v. Wade*. Despite this, several states have moved to infringe on bodily autonomy by imposing strict legislation surrounding abortion, often through "heartbeat bills" which restrict abortion access after a fetal heartbeat is detected, which is often before a person even realizes they are pregnant. Though none of these laws are currently in effect and abortion is still legal in all 50 states, nine states have currently passed restrictive early abortion bans. (NPR) Even though these laws exclusively impact people who can experience pregnancy, largely women, they are being made by disproportionately male, Christian lawmakers, who have been empowered by decades of unchecked power and privilege.

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<sup>1</sup> The terms *woman/women* in this project include nonbinary women, transgender women, and cisgender women. Women are **not** the only ones who can experience pregnancy. Transgender men and nonbinary people can experience pregnancy and the use of the terms *woman/women* is not intended to be exclusionary of them.

It is important to note that *privilege* is an unearned advantage, such as the advantages and social capital one gains by being part of a dominant group. In this case, the dominant groups are *male* and *Christian*. *White* is also a dominant group in the United States. To cite privilege is not to judge if one's life has been difficult or not, it is only to say that a certain diversity factor – such as gender, race, or religion – has not made life *more* difficult. Often, it means that a particular diversity factor has made life *less* difficult.

Christians can expect that they will likely have time off work or school for their major religious holidays. They can expect that the authority figures – teachers, community leaders, law enforcement, judges, and elected officials – are likely to share their religious views. Christians can expect that if they are tried for a crime, a jury of their peers will be mostly comprised of people who believe as they do. These are just a few of many examples of expectations that non-Christian people cannot hold regarding their experience in the United States, which make them examples of Christian privilege. Another example is demanding that one's own religious views influence public law, which can be seen in Christian arguments against abortion and queer rights.

Perhaps the most egregious example of what privilege looks like in action is a bill currently being proposed in Ohio. If passed into law, this bill would not only “create the capital offense of aggravated abortion murder and the offense of abortion murder,” but would also require doctors to perform a medical procedure that does not exist (Ohio State Legislature). Under the proposed bill, doctors would be required to transfer tissue from an ectopic

pregnancy<sup>2</sup> into the uterus, presumably with the intent of preserving the pregnancy. However, such a procedure does not presently exist and is said to be medically impossible. Doctors who do not comply can be charged with the new offenses of abortion murder or aggravated abortion murder, which could carry sentences of prison or even death. This example of elected officials drafting science fiction into law is the result of many overlapping influences, among them the paternalistic belief that they know what is best for and have the right to make lifechanging decisions for others, specifically women. Many opponents of reproductive justice cite religious convictions as reason to protect the “unborn,” but they seem to only be interested in protecting life up until the moment of birth.

Absurd and over-reaching legislation such as the Ohio bill and the Trump administration’s gag rule for healthcare providers, which prohibits organizations who receive Title X funding from referring patients for abortions except in cases of rape or incest, are already causing harm. Planned Parenthood, one of the largest healthcare providers for low-income patients in the United States, withdrew from Title X funding this year over the rule. (NPR) As a result, patients will see a drastic decrease in accessibility to services, which can quickly deteriorate into increased prolonged medical issues, decreased quality of life, and substantial medical debt.

Queer rights are under attack under the Christian patriarchy as well. The Trump Administration, most highly-regarded by white Evangelical Protestants, (Schwadel and Smith) has a track record for undermining the rights of queer Americans, citing religious freedom.

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<sup>2</sup> Ectopic pregnancy is an extra-uterine pregnancy, most often occurring in the fallopian tubes. Ectopic pregnancies are not viable and are a life-threatening medical condition

GLAAD, a queer rights advocacy group, has documented the Trump Administration's long history of perpetuating discrimination against the queer community, going back to "any mention of the LGBTQ community was erased from White House, Department of State, and Department of Labor websites" on Trump's inauguration day in January 2017 (GLAAD). Two of the most recent entries cite the Trump Administration's support of policies and laws that allow discrimination against the queer community on the basis of religious belief. (GLAAD)

Though it seems almost too absurd to be true for the land of the free, this is the reality of the current state a country run by people fueled by corruption and misinterpretation and empowered by decades of inequity. Disproportionately male and Christian, these people speak and make life-changing decisions for women, for the queer community, and even for the 23% of Americans who are unaffiliated with any religious tradition (Pew Research Center), often based on their misinformed and oppressive religious convictions.

The patriarchy functions as a system of oppression because it puts men at an unfair and unearned advantage over women. Men consistently earn more money than women for the same jobs, contributing to an ongoing gender-wage gap. According to the American Association of University Women, women made, on average, \$0.82 for every \$1.00 a man made in 2018. Moreover, the value of men's labor depreciates when women enter their field, resulting in lower wages for all sexes. This gap is often wrongly attributed to women's tendency to choose lower-paying jobs, but the gap is calculated based on men and women working the same jobs in the same industries. The gap is compounded by race and other diversity factors. (AAUW)

While this core inequity is between the sexes, when we consider intersectionality<sup>3</sup> and power dynamics, we see that the impact of male privilege is compounded by white privilege, which is then compounded by Christian privilege and so on, putting able-bodied cis-gender heterosexual white male Christians at the top of the theoretical privilege food chain. Likewise, the impacts of oppression can be less the more privileged identities one bears. A white Christian woman holds more social capital and privilege than a black Christian woman, even though both are Christian women. The black Christian woman's experience will likely be drastically different than the white Christian woman's, because her experiences of being black and a woman compound one another while the white Christian woman only holds one marginalized identity in this example.

Both women, however, are harmed by their religious tradition that tells them they are descended from the woman responsible for humankind's fall from grace and inherently burdened by her sins. Perhaps the most heinous crime of the Christian patriarchy is in gaslighting generations of women so thoroughly that they uphold complementarianism and renounce their own right to freedom and self-determination because they are told from the very first book of the Bible that they are unworthy. In her critique of patriarchal ideology in the Bible, Rosemary Radford Ruether says, "No one who is truly a feminist can find any authentic meaning for herself within the context of these traditions. To do so is sheer masochism and

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<sup>3</sup> *Intersectionality* considers all the identities a person belongs to and how they relate to one another and to power. Someone may belong to a powerful group, such as *male* or *white*, but also a marginalized group, such as *queer* or *disabled*, so that person functions in life at the intersection of *white male* and *disabled queer*, which leaves them privileged in some ways and oppressed in others. When multiple marginalized identities coexist in one person, such as *black, female, queer, poor, uneducated, disabled, etc.* the impact of oppression is compounded, and one must consider all identities individually and collaboratively to understand the person's holistic experience.

dependency.” (Reuther) It is hard to disagree, but what is the solution to a centuries-old framework deeply rooted in fear, shame, and control?

Feminism may hold some answers. Feminism is not, as many believe, favor of women over men. It has been said that this common misrepresentation of feminism is a result of the fear the patriarchy and those who benefit from it have of being treated the way the patriarchy has treated women. Because it has been the status quo for so long, proponents of the patriarchy cannot seem to even fathom a framework in which one group is not dominant over another.

Feminism is the radical notion that all people are equal regardless of any diversity factor and deserve equitable opportunity and treatment. Feminist frameworks would see all people empowered to live true to their highest good for the benefit of the individual and for the benefit of the larger society when those presently oppressed have the opportunity to freely share their unique gifts and abilities, which are stifled by oppression.

This is the greatest secret of the patriarchy – it harms men, too.

While women are being held in submissive roles and demonized for rejecting them, men are likewise being held to unsustainable expectations to engage in pursuits that society deems *manly*, and therefore appropriate. The strict gender binary that the patriarchy thrives on discourages men from expressing emotion through natural responses such as crying or conversation, lest they be seen as *womanly* and therefore *inferior* and *weak*. The strict gender binary and the demands it places upon humans is reinforced by the idea of complementarianism, and fear and shame come into play when men are told that these roles

are God-given. When a man does not fit this mold, he can be made to feel as if he falls short of the expectations of God, has returned to his inherent sinful nature, and as if he is in jeopardy of endangering his immortal soul. Those are some pretty significant emotional and spiritual risks, which many are likely unwilling to undertake, resulting in the suppression of their humanity in the interest of being what society calls *manly*.

This fear and shame-based system of control is a far cry from actual spirituality and connection with the Divine. It is the opinion of the author of this paper that the political tool that is Christianity created the so-called problem of inherent sinfulness in order to sell the “cure” of salvation from inherent sinfulness by preying on humankind’s natural desires to belong and be affirmed, as well as playing into common, deep-seeded fears regarding human beings’ own worthiness, goodness, and ability to be loved. While Jesus of Nazareth did have some admirable teachings and there is much to learn from the Christian tradition, Christianity as a whole is a cheap version of true spirituality, which should be rooted in love – love for self, love for the beloved community, and of and for the Divine if one believes in such, rather than in trying to gain redemption for a crime humankind has not committed.

Humankind may begin to heal from this deep wound if they are willing to return to the beginning and challenge some basic assumptions that exist in society today.<sup>4</sup> This includes the assumption that there is a natural order or hierarchy between men and women, adults and children, between humankind and nature. They include the assumption that humans are inherently sinful, that humans are in need of salvation, that humans are incapable of behaving

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<sup>4</sup> The author first heard this idea when it was included in a sermon by Rev. Carol Bodeau at Westside Unitarian Universalist Church of Knoxville, TN in 2019. The sermon was not published or available for proper citation.



morally without God, that answers even exist for the existential questions that religion strives to give answers to. Above all, addressing the harm that this system has done to society requires Christians' willingness to engage critically with their own belief system and a commitment to honoring the inherent worth and dignity of all beings. Because Christians hold the most social and political power in the United States, it is on them to live the values they claim by putting *love one another* into action, into law, and back into Christianity.

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