

Session 8

Freedom of Belief and Religion

OBJECTIVES:

- To consider the scope of freedom of belief and religion, including the right to define and interpret one's own religion and the right to be free from religion altogether.
- To discuss the distinction between the right to religious belief and the right to engage in religious practices; and to reflect on policies and laws that may legitimately interfere with some religious practices.
- To explore how a woman might resolve a conflict between her individual rights and the edicts of her religion.

In This Session:

Among the major world religions, it is rare that women have leadership roles and are significant to the interpretation and practice of their faith. So what happens when a woman, from a traditional religion that supports women's subservience to men, asserts her own vision of the divinity and how she should worship? International law states that she has the right to interpret religion as she chooses, even if her faith leaders condemn her. In the story that follows about Sister Elizabeth Johnson, a widely respected Catholic scholar not easily dismissed by church leaders, she writes extensively about her own vision of the Catholic Church and the role of women in the church. Her story has universal application in how she goes about being both a part of her religion and challenging some of its most long-held tenets about women.

The next reading selection and exercise focuses on Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), which affirms the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. In this session, we will brainstorm examples of the free exercise of Article 18 rights and situations where the rights are denied. The final reading selection and questions address secularism and what rights are and are not guaranteed in a secular state. We will examine how a state that has no official religion and defends the rights of those who practice no religion adequately protects religious practices.

Reading Assignments:

Feminism in Faith: Sister Elizabeth Johnson's Challenge to the Vatican

Jamie L. Manson

Excerpts

"You say Mary is too passive. Isn't obedience the greatest virtue?" This was one of 40 questions sent to Elizabeth Johnson by a cardinal when she was up for a tenure-track position at the Catholic University of America (CUA) in Washington, D.C., in September 1987. . . .

The cardinal interrogating her was Joseph Ratzinger, the future Pope Benedict XVI.

Though Johnson dutifully answered each query, Ratzinger was still not satisfied. He proceeded to take the extraordinary measure of calling every cardinal in the United States to come to Washington to interrogate her on the content of the article. Johnson was the first female faculty member to come up for tenure at CUA, and the first to be subjected to an examination by the cardinals.

At the initial meeting, the hall was filled with men in black garb, gold chains across their chests, and priests at each of their sides. Johnson was the only woman in the room. "There were these men and they had all the power. I was vulnerable and at their mercy," Johnson remembers. "There was patriarchy using its power against me, to deprive me of what, in fairness, I should have been given." Twenty-five years later, the recollection still brings waves of sadness and anger across her face.

More than half of the world's billion Catholics are women, and, according to church doctrine, every one of them is barred from the opportunity to be ordained as a deacon or priest. Many feminist Catholics maintain that the fight for women's ordination in the church is about much more than getting women into the priesthood.

[Johnson's] most recent clash with the church hierarchy played itself out quite publicly in March 2011, after the publication of her book *The Quest for the Living God*, in which she argues for a broader and deeper language for God, particularly language that reflects the reality that "God loves women and passionately desires their flourishing."

"All-male images of God are hierarchical images rooted in the unequal relation between women and men," she writes. "Once women no longer relate to men as patriarchal fathers, lords, and kings in society, these images become religiously inadequate. Instead of evoking the reality of God, they block it."

Though it met with high accolades from both the academy and laypeople, the Committee on Doctrine of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops issued a condemnation of the book. They declared that the publication "completely undermines the Gospel and the faith of those who believe in God." . . .

The committee's action shocked Johnson, who has been a sister of St. Joseph for over 50 years, because she was completely unaware that the panel was discussing her book, let alone submitting it to an orthodoxy test. Her requests for a dialogue with the whole committee went unacknowledged. "It could have been so interesting and beneficial to the church," she tells me. But the committee held its ground and reaffirmed its condemnation. To this day they have not responded to her requests for a meeting. . . .

The question of whether to ordain women didn't emerge until the late 1960s or early 1970s. Second-wave feminism and the optimism surrounding the reforms of the Second Vatican Council, held from 1962 to 1965, led Catholic women, especially in the U.S., to ask whether they too could be priests. The movement was further catalyzed by the decision of the Episcopal Church to ordain women in 1976.

The hierarchy's central argument against ordination is based on the "Theology of the Body," a teaching first developed by Pope John Paul II in 1979. The late pontiff held that while women and men are equal in worth and dignity, their physical and anatomical differences are evidence that God intends different roles and purposes for them. God designed men and women to complement each other, the pope argued, and their genders dictate their distinct roles in both church and society. John Paul II believed that women are endowed with a "feminine genius" – a special capacity to offer tenderness and nurture to the community.

But special is not equal, which is why only men can be priests.

Johnson's ability to balance patience and respect for the institution with rigorous scholarship and academic integrity eventually won her tenure. But there was one moment in the inquest that seems to have emblazoned itself forever on her memory: Toward the end of the questioning, Boston's Cardinal Bernard Law slammed shut his binder of Johnson's writings and scoffed, "You mostly teach Christology. You're not going to do anymore of this feminist stuff." He pushed the files away.³⁷

After 30 years of advocating for reforms in the church's teachings on women, how does Johnson remain patient with the hierarchy? "Partly by blocking it out! You'll go crazy if you don't."

She picks up a small picture frame from her desk, and shows me a photo she took while teaching in South Africa in the late 1980s. Apartheid was still the law of the land, Nelson Mandela sat in prison, and army tanks were positioned on every street corner. Walking by a pastel-colored building in Cape Town, Johnson noticed that it had been defaced with very thick, black paint. "Hang Mandela," the wall read. Johnson invites me to look closer at the photo. Someone had used a pencil to add a small, but mighty preposition, transforming the graffiti to read "Hang On Mandela."

³⁷ In 2002, Cardinal Law resigned his position after his extensive cover-up of sex abuse cases in the Boston Archdiocese was revealed in court.

“Someone took and turned that message in the darkest of days,” Johnson says, tearing up at the memory. She saw this sign just before returning to the United States to be interrogated by the cardinals. “That picture has become my answer to why I stay in the church.”³⁸

Questions for Group Discussion:

- Jamie Manson explains in her article that: “John Paul II believed that women are endowed with a ‘feminine genius’ – a special capacity to offer tenderness and nurture to the community. But special is not equal, which is why only men can be priests.” How does Sister Elizabeth challenge this premise in her writings and in the choices she’s made in life?
- Do you think it matters whether it is men or women interpreting faith and creating customs? Would the interpretation of one’s faith or of a supreme being be the same if most of the religions’ leaders were women? Is a balance between men and women in religious leadership important? Why, or why not?
- Do you believe Sister Elizabeth has the right to challenge her church’s teachings? If so, what is that right? Does the right come from international law, or from a self-evident truth?
- How was Sister Elizabeth able to both excel as a teacher of Catholic doctrine, winning promotions and awards, and at the same time challenge the church’s tradition of not ordaining women? What was her strategy?

Team Exercise:

Write on the board or on a large piece of paper the language of Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and asked the participants to study it:

Article 18. Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion;

This right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.

Divide the group into teams of three or four participants. Separately, on the board, on a large sheet of paper, or in a handout, ask each team to address the points below. The answers can be from participants’ own experience, what they have heard happens elsewhere, or a fictional example that the participants can imagine would be possible sometime, someplace.

- Provide an example of circumstances where people are required to disclose their religion or set of beliefs.
- Provide an example of circumstances where if a person declines to follow the practices of a religion or set of beliefs, she or he risks prejudice, discrimination, and/or punishment.

³⁸ Manson is a BuzzFeed Contributor; the full article was posted on March 6, 2014: <http://www.buzzfeed.com/jamielmanson/feminism-in-faith-catholicism>

- Provide an example where if a person declines to believe or accept the teachings of particular religion or follow a set of beliefs, she or he risks prejudice, discrimination, and/or punishment.
- Provide an example of a law or policy that interferes with the teaching or observance of a religion or set of beliefs.
- Provide an example where a situation prevents a person from following her or his religion or set of beliefs.
- Provide an example where the practice of certain religious traditions has been criminalized.
- Provide an example of where the observance of religion or set of beliefs conflicts with other human rights, such as the equality between men and women, or right for individuals to consent to marriage (or other human rights).

Reconvene the group and ask a volunteer from each team to report to the group her team's findings. One way to do this is to read a single question, and then ask each team to provide its answers, before going on to the next question.

Questions for Group Discussion:

- What are some observations you made during this exercise?
What did you learn?
- Do most of the participants agree that the right to *not* practice a religion is just as important as the right to practice one's religion? Why or why not?
- What role should human rights play in guiding how religion is practiced and/or enforced?
- Does any authority have the right to enforce how one practices one's religion or set of beliefs, regardless of international law? Why or why not? Are there exceptions to this?
- Do human rights protect women's religious rights more than men's? Is it the reverse? Is it the same for men and women?

Reading Assignment:

Secularism

“I swear by my religion. I will die for it. But it is my personal affair. The State has nothing to do with it. The State would look after your secular welfare, health, communications, foreign relations, currency and so on, but not your or my religion. That is everybody’s personal concern.”

*Mahatma Gandhi*³⁹

Secularism is a political principle whereby the state government is separate from the state’s religious institution(s). A secular state makes and enforces laws that protect **all** of its citizens equally, without regard to their religious beliefs and practices. At the same time, a secular state is tasked with protecting its citizens’ rights to practice their religion(s) and live by the rules of their beliefs.

Questions for Group Discussion:

- What are some countries that have secular governments? Is the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion always protected in each of those countries?
- Are there examples of a secular government impinging on the religious freedom of its citizens?
- What are ways that a secular state can protect freedom of religion and of the practice of religion?
- What religious freedoms are frequently not protected by theocratic governments, or by governments that are regulated or heavily influenced by religious law? Are there some people in these societies who are particularly vulnerable (for example, religious minorities, women seeking birth control, couples seeking divorce, and others)? Why?

39 Mahatma Gandhi, *India of My Dreams*, Rajpal & Sons, Delhi, p. 258.