

# A Comparative Study of Traditional Confucian and Christian Perspectives on Women

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**Abstract:** *Confucianism and Christianity, serving as the predominant ideological frameworks in traditional Chinese culture and Western civilization respectively, have significantly shaped the evolution of both civilizations. Thus, when examining the parallels and distinctions between Chinese and Western civilizations, Confucianism and Christianity emerge as two indispensable areas of study. This paper aims to explore how these two ideologies construct notions of gender and social gender order, analyzing their expectations of women and the constraints they impose on women's social status. Ultimately, it endeavors to offer a fresh cross-cultural viewpoint for contemporary discussions on gender equality and social gender studies.*

**Keywords:** Women's Perspectives; Gender Social Structure; Confucianism; Christian Civilization.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

It should be noted that in Chinese history, no religion has been universally practiced in a specific region, unlike Christianity or Islam. Buddhism, as an influential foreign religion in China, never became a belief for the entire population. Historically, this may be because orthodox religions lacked the social conditions to develop in China. Since the Shang Dynasty, Chinese rulers had connections to "heavenly authority." After the Zhou Dynasty, emperors were defined as "Sons of Heaven," with their power symbolizing divine authority. This gave secular power a religious dimension, leaving no space for orthodox religions to emerge or spread. Confucius elevated and refined this unity of human and divine power into the "Confucian" system, which was revered by feudal rulers [1].

From a practical perspective, it is reasonable to call Confucianism a "religion," as the scholarly class ("shi") in Han Chinese traditions revered Confucianism in a way similar to religious believers. In effect, Confucianism transformed from secular ethics into a form of divine belief, regulating people's thoughts and actions like a religion, and reinforcing the feudal social hierarchy needed by rulers [2]. However, it is essential to clarify that Confucianism is not inherently a religion. Its orthodox status comes not from religious characteristics but from its role as a comprehensive system of governance and practical philosophy.

In Chinese history, no religion fully developed. Confucian ethics took the place of religion. Confucianism had absolute authority in China's intellectual realm. Any foreign religion wishing to spread in China had to accept the ideological and social system created by Confucianism. For example, when Buddhism entered China over two thousand years ago, it absorbed Confucian ideas.

Moreover, neither Daoism, which seeks immortality, nor Buddhism, which aims for enlightenment and Buddhahood, emphasized secular constraints on women. The norms of traditional Chinese secular life mainly came from Confucianism. Therefore, in this paper, I chose Confucianism, which is not a religion, as a comparison to Christianity, the most influential ideology in Western civilization, to analyze their expectations and requirements for women.

In terms of research methods and materials, this study mainly uses literature research and the comparative analysis of ideas. Literature research is an important tool for understanding the history of ideas, especially when analyzing classical texts that carry the basic ideas of Confucianism. This is a fundamental method for reinterpreting Confucian thought in contemporary studies. For research materials, I focused on Confucian classics such as *Zhouyi*, *Liji*, and *Chunqiu Fanlu*, particularly those sections dealing with women's roles. I also paid special attention to Confucian traditional texts on women like *Lie Nü Zhuan* and *Nü Jie*, which explain the ethical expectations and roles of women in Confucianism. Corresponding to Confucian classics, I selected the Bible, the core text of Christian belief, to explore its views on gender relationships, the responsibilities of women, and the roles women can hold in religion and society. As the foundation of Christian thought, the Bible not only defines gender relations but also outlines the roles and expectations of women in Christian society.

At the same time, I will use comparative analysis to focus on the value systems and theoretical logic of the two thought systems. By comparing their approaches to gender roles and social gender order, I aim to reveal their similarities and differences. Through analyzing and comparing these classic texts, this study seeks to show how Confucianism and Christianity shape social gender order through the construction of gender roles and influence the historical shaping of women's status and identity.

## 2. CONFUCIAN PERSPECTIVES ON WOMEN

Recent studies on Confucianism have reexamined traditional views on women. The renowned scholar Zhang Xianglong explains gender concepts in pre-Qin Confucian thought from the perspective of Yin and Yang, arguing that traditional Confucianism does not explicitly discriminate against women [3]. His view has gained support from many scholars, who now agree that the suppression and discrimination of women in Confucian thought stem from misinterpretations after the pre-Qin period.

### 2.1 Gender Relations of Male Superiority and Female Inferiority

Confucian classical texts place women in an important position. In shared classics like *Zhouyi* from both Daoism and Confucianism, there are discussions on gender relations. In *Zhouyi*, the concept appears of heaven (*Qian*) representing men and earth (*Kun*) representing women. It also states, "Heaven is above and noble, while earth is below and humble." (*Zhouyi*, Xi Ci I.)

Philosophers also acknowledge that traditional Chinese philosophies, such as Confucianism and Daoism, use the complementary and interactive relationship of Yin and Yang to suggest the roles of men and women. It is important to explain the concept of Yin and Yang. The earliest Chinese medical text, *Huangdi Neijing*, provides a more complete definition of Yin and Yang: "Yin and Yang are general laws of the universe. They are the blueprint for all things, the source of change, and the foundation of birth and destruction. They are the driving force behind the development and transformation of all things. [...] Yang energy gathers above to become heaven, and Yin energy gathers below to become earth. Yin is still, while Yang is active. Yang initiates, and Yin nourishes [...] In nature, the pure Yang energy rises to become heaven, while the turbid Yin energy descends to become earth." (*Huangdineijing* VI. Yinyangyingxiangpian5.)

In this concept, we can see that Yang is usually associated with heaven, while Yin is associated with earth. This correspondence is also affirmed in *Zhouyi*, which states: "Qian is equivalent to heaven, Yang, power, and creativity, while Kun is equivalent to earth, Yin, receptivity, and preservation." (*Zhouyi* Xicizhuan) Their interaction produces all things and events, just like the mating of men and women, which brings new life. As mentioned earlier, in *Zhouyi*, heaven represents men and earth represents women. Thus, in traditional Chinese philosophy, Yang represents men, and Yin represents women.

In the *Chunqiu Fanlu* by Dong Zhongshu, a thinker from the Western Han period, there is much content where Yin and Yang are used to represent men and women. While he does not specifically discuss the behavior of women, he establishes a code of conduct for women based on the theory from *Zhouyi* that heaven is more noble than earth. This code places men as noble and women as humble, laying the theoretical foundation for the formation of later female behavior norms [4].

In recent reinterpretations of Confucianism, many scholars argue that early Chinese philosophy did not explicitly discriminate against women. For example, the contemporary philosopher Zhang Xianglong believes that traditional Confucianism uses Yin to represent women, but women, like Yin, were never inherently inferior. Discrimination against women in ancient Chinese culture was neither certain nor universal [5]. I can understand the basis for this view, as both heaven and earth, or Yin and Yang, are just two aspects of things, interacting and each with its purpose. While there is a hierarchical difference between Yin and Yang, they are ontologically equal.

In addition, another explanation for why many scholars believe pre-Qin Confucianism did not explicitly discriminate against women is that most men, like women, were subject to Confucianism's strict norms. The best example of this is that Confucianism requires both men and women to unconditionally honor and obey their parents. For example, in the *Yili*, it is stated: "A father is the heaven of a child." (*Yili*, Sangfuzhuan.) Under the Confucian constraint of filial piety, not only were women alienated as tools for family unity, lineage continuation, and household affairs, but the fate of most men was also similar to that of women. *Liji* states that the purpose of sacrifices or rituals is "obedience." Men must obey the spirits, follow the ruler outside, and be filial to their parents

at home [6]. Therefore, obedience is not only a requirement for women in Confucianism, but also for men.

But I still believe we need to approach this view with caution. After all, even if we acknowledge that early Chinese traditional philosophy did not explicitly discriminate against women, in practice, much of the theory in Chinese traditional philosophy, especially Confucianism (likely due to misinterpretations by later generations), did become a tool for oppressing women during the feudal period. We have to acknowledge that even in the pre-Qin era, when Confucianism was just forming, the social structure and institutional arrangements in Confucian thought were male-centered. As feudal society developed, women were gradually deprived of power in politics, law, military, and the economy, which also meant they were denied the same right to education as men. During feudal China, most women were confined to the household, with strict limitations on their ability to go outside. It is undeniable that the exploitation and oppression of women in Chinese feudal society were largely justified by Confucian thought.

## 2.2 Social Gender Order Under the Influence of Confucian Thought

In theory, the gender social order in Chinese thought is also based on the concepts of heaven and earth, as well as yin and yang [7]. However, feudal society gradually replaced the dynamic interaction and balance between yin and yang with a clear-cut relationship where men are respected and women are inferior. The social order emerging from this view believes that men are mainly responsible for external affairs and are superior to women.

### 2.2.1 "Li" and the Gender Social Order in Feudal China.

In Confucian thought, "Li" (Confucian ritual culture, which can be understood as the set of rules guiding people's behavior) is actually a tool used by feudal rulers to maintain social order and preserve gender hierarchies. Confucian classics such as *Yili*, *Zhouli* and *Liji* provide authoritative records and explanations of Confucian ritual culture, with the deepest influence on the ritual systems throughout history. In this paper, I primarily focus on the *Liji* as the main subject of study because it emphasizes the differences between men and women quite clearly.

In the *Liji*, it is stated that the concept of "Li" begins with the strict rituals between husband and wife [8]. There is a distinction between men and women, and only by adhering to proper rituals between spouses can a family achieve harmony. This foundation then extends to the correct rituals between fathers and sons, and between rulers and subjects, ensuring the stability of the world. "When men and women are distinguished, then the bond between father and son is formed; when the bond between father and son is formed, life can continue... Without distinction, there is no meaning, and this is the way of beasts." (Liji Jiaotesheng) This suggests that the distinction between men and women, and the human relationships built on it, are the prerequisites and foundation for humanity to differentiate itself from animals and progress into civilization.

The *Liji* first requires that men and women must be distinct in all aspects of life and social activities, strictly limiting their contact and interactions. In daily life, men and women should not sit together casually, share clothing racks or hangers, nor share towels or combs [9]. Unless it is for rituals or funerals, men and women should not pass objects to each other by hand. If it is necessary to pass something by hand, the woman should place the object in a bamboo basket for passing; if there is no bamboo basket, both parties should sit first, one places the object on the ground, and the other takes it. The outer courtyard and the inner household should not use the same well, nor should men and women use the same bathroom or share the same bed. They should not borrow items from each other. Men and women should not wear each other's clothes. What is said inside the house should not be spoken outside, and what is spoken outside should not be brought into the house [10].

In terms of living space, men and women were also strictly segregated. For example, the *Liji* stipulates that palaces should distinguish between outer areas for men and inner areas for women. Men and women were not allowed to freely enter each other's living areas [11]. Men entering the inner quarters were not allowed to speak loudly or point with their fingers [12].

Building on the strict separation of male and female interactions and activity spaces, the *Liji* further imposed rigid distinctions on their social roles. Politics, military affairs, and other public domains were designated as male responsibilities, while women were tasked primarily with managing household duties. The *Liji* stipulated that men and women should each perform their respective duties without interfering in or discussing the responsibilities of the other. For example, it states: "Men do not bring discussions of their external duties into the home, and household matters should not be shared outside." (Liji Quli I.) Women were confined to the domestic sphere and

prohibited from inquiring about political matters. The differences between men and women, as well as their distinct roles in social division of labor, were marked from birth. The Liji records, "Affairs in vast domains and external matters are regarded as men's responsibilities. (Women are not supposed to interfere.)" (Liji Sheyi) As a result, within the family, the husband was the primary bearer of income and social prestige, serving as the dominant figure in the marital relationship. This reinforced a male-centered moral, social, and political order that upheld male superiority over women.

### 2.2.2 A virtuous wife and a good mother

During China's feudal period, women were mainly confined to the family. Their main task in life was to care for their parents, husbands, children, and their husband's elders. In other words, they were expected to fulfill roles such as a devoted daughter, good wife, virtuous sister-in-law, obedient daughter-in-law, and loving mother. Of course, the most important roles were that of a good wife and loving mother, which are collectively referred to in Chinese as "xianqi liangmu." This concept includes many expectations and details, but the most common summary is the "Three Obediences and Four Virtues."

The concept of the "Three Obediences" first appeared in the Yili: "A woman must follow the 'three obediences' and has no independent way. Before marriage, she obeys her father; after marriage, she obeys her husband; if her husband dies, she obeys her son." (Yili Zhushu Fusang) This sentence appears in a chapter discussing mourning attire and originally referred to regulating women's funeral clothing. During the Zhou Dynasty, a patriarchal system centered around the Zhou emperor was in place, and no specific rituals were established for women. Therefore, women's funeral customs, including what to wear, had to follow the male-dominated rituals, as stated in the sentence, "before marriage, follow the father; after marriage, follow the husband; after the husband's death, follow the son."

However, later generations expanded this concept beyond mourning customs to encompass all aspects of female behavior. In the Liji, a similar idea is expressed: "When a woman marries, after she leaves her family home, the man leads, and she follows. This marks the beginning of the husband-wife relationship. A woman is one who follows others: as a child, she follows her father and brothers; after marriage, she follows her husband; and when her husband dies, she follows her son. A husband, on the other hand, is one who leads with wisdom." (Liji Jiaotesheng) This idea extends beyond marriage rituals, emphasizing that men must lead with wisdom, while women must follow.

It is important to note that, in practice, the "three obediences" were not meant to require women to unconditionally obey or listen to men. In particular, unconditional obedience to or following one's son goes against the traditional Chinese concept of filial piety. Filial piety grants parents control over their children. In a patriarchal society, the father's authority in the family is absolute, but the mother's authority over her children should also be respected. Especially after the father's death, part of the father's authority is transferred to the mother, which is why a widowed mother often has greater influence on her children than a typical mother.

The "Gui Men Yao Xun" from the Qing Dynasty offers a more practical explanation and interpretation of the "three obediences." It states that a woman should submit to her father at home, meaning she should listen to her parents' beneficial advice; she should obey her husband after marriage, which simply means maintaining harmony in the marriage; and after her husband's death, she should obey her son, meaning she should consult with him on matters. At the same time, when the father, husband, or son makes a mistake, as a daughter, wife, or mother, she should not blindly "obey," but instead "advise," "dispute," or even "guide," though this should be done carefully and with the right approach [13].

The "Four Virtues," often mentioned alongside the "Three Obediences," refer to four qualities expected of women. The earliest reference to these virtues appeared in the *Zhouli*, where womanly virtue, womanly speech, womanly appearance, and womanly work were listed [14]. However, their specific content was not detailed in this text. Later, Zheng Xuan (127–200) explained the Four Virtues in his commentary on the *Zhouli* as follows: womanly virtue referred to chastity and obedience; womanly speech emphasized proper and appropriate speech; womanly appearance involved grooming and appearance standards for women; and womanly work encompassed tasks like sewing, embroidery, and weaving, or the products of such labor [15].

In the Eastern Han Dynasty, Ban Zhao provided a more comprehensive interpretation of the Four Virtues in her work *Nüjie*. She accepted the subordinate status of women established by the "Three Obediences" and offered an

explanation of the Four Virtues aligned with the needs of a patriarchal society. According to Ban Zhao, womanly virtue did not mean extraordinary talent or intelligence, but emphasized moral integrity, a sense of shame, and proper behavior. Womanly speech did not mean being eloquent but involved speaking appropriately, avoiding harsh words, and not being annoying or offensive. Womanly appearance was not about striking beauty but maintaining cleanliness and neat attire. Finally, womanly work did not mean exceptional skills in handicrafts but focused on dedication to spinning and weaving, refraining from frivolity, managing the household diligently, and preparing clean and decent meals for guests [16]. Overall, Ban Zhao's interpretation of the Four Virtues became the most authoritative source for their understanding in later feudal society.

### 3. THE JEWISH-CHRISTIAN VIEW OF WOMEN

The view of women in Christian philosophy and the portrayal of women in the Bible have greatly influenced women's education, marriage, family roles, and social functions in Christian countries. In this section, I will analyze the depiction of women in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, explore Christianity's views and expectations of women, and address the contradiction between women's active roles in the early Christian church and the patriarchal elements in the New Testament.

#### 3.1 Gender Relations in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament

Christian ideology is based on Judaism, with many of its rules derived from it. Therefore, I will first explain the gender theories in the Hebrew Bible.

The Hebrew Bible teaches that the origin of the world comes from God. In the first chapter of *Genesis*, it is stated that both men and women were created in God's image, sharing His dignity and glory and serving as His representatives on earth. Both received God's blessings equally. The Bible defines humanity as consisting of two sexes, emphasizing their complementary nature and foreshadowing the New Testament's doctrine of spiritual equality between men and women [17].

Genesis 2 describes in detail the order and process of God's creation of humans. The motivation for creating women is stated as "It is not good for the man to be by himself" The term "not good" can also be understood as imperfect or incomplete, indicating that man alone was not ideal and did not align with the perfect world described earlier in Genesis. Therefore, God created "one like himself as a help to him", referring to women [18].

The creation of woman from man's rib is a particularly controversial event. Some scholars argue that this story signifies the essential equality of the sexes. After God brought the woman to Adam, Adam declared, "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh" (Genesis 2, 23). The term "bone and flesh" appears in various places in the Bible. The closest reference is in Genesis 29:14, where Laban says to Jacob, "Truly, you are my bone and my flesh." Here, "bone and flesh" is used in Hebrew to describe an unbreakable and enduring familial relationship. Similarly, when Adam uses the phrase, it expresses an intimate and inseparable connection.

Additionally, linguistic interpretations provide further insight. F. Max Muller, a renowned scholar of religion and linguistics, in his seminal work discusses the use of ancient Hebrew expressions. He specifically cites the phrase "bone of my bones, flesh of my flesh" and explains that the Hebrew word for "bone" (etzem) can also mean "self" or "the same." According to Muller, if Adam were speaking in modern language, he would essentially be saying that Eve is the same as himself [19].

Some scholars argue that God created woman to accompany and assist man, which reflects the idea that man is prioritized and holds a higher status than woman. In this view, man is an independent being, while woman, created from man's body, is part of him. As a result, women inherently lack independence and are subordinate to men, existing in a relationship of inequality [20].

In fact, I believe it becomes simpler if we understand this concept through the Chinese philosophy of Yin and Yang. In God's order of creation, the essence of man and woman as created beings is equal. Both possess the image of God and share equal dignity. On the other hand, men and women have distinct attributes, leading to differences in their roles. Adam was the primary caretaker of the Garden of Eden, while Eve was created as his helper. Thus, similar to the traditional Chinese concept of Yin and Yang, the relationship between men and women in the early chapters of Genesis is essentially equal in nature but reflects functional and hierarchical differences.



On the other hand, the story of Eve tempting Adam in Genesis can also be interpreted as a contrast between male rationality and female sensibility, though this opposition is not explicitly stated.

Feminists argue that the stories in the Hebrew Bible reflect the harm and suppression women experienced from the laws, customs, and values of the time. They believe that family life in the Hebrew Bible was always under patriarchal rule. Before a daughter married, she was controlled by her father. For example, if the groom falsely accused the bride of losing her virginity, he had to pay a fine of a hundred silver shekels, which went entirely to the bride's father [21]. Some stories also show a father's control over his daughter or the daughter sacrificing herself for her father, such as when Caleb offered his daughter as a prize for conquering Kiriath-sepher: "And Caleb said, I will give Achsah, my daughter, as wife to the man who overcomes Kiriath-sepher and takes it." (Judges 1: 12.) Another example is Jephthah, who sacrificed his daughter to remain loyal to his vow (Judges 11: 29-40). After marriage, women were controlled by their husbands. The Hebrew Bible also introduces the concept of concubines. In one story, a Levite from Ephraim, after his concubine was abused and died, dismembered her body and sent the pieces to the tribes of Israel. (Judges 19) Furthermore, women had no right to divorce [22], showing that men and women were unequal in marriage. Therefore, feminists conclude from these Hebrew Bible stories that women's lives were controlled by men [23].

The Hebrew Bible reflects a highly contradictory view of women. On one hand, it retains traces of a matrilineal society, suggesting that women and men are essentially the same. Women could hold social positions or have an identity outside of the home (I will explain the social roles women could hold in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament in the section on social gender roles). Thus, some parts of it reflect the concept of gender equality. On the other hand, it emphasizes that women brought original sin, must submit to men, are a part of men, and are controlled by them, even being defined as men's property [24].

In the four Gospels, Jesus' attitude toward women shows no signs of discrimination. In fact, it can be seen that he treated the marginalized people, including women who were often regarded as "second-class citizens," with equality. For example, in the Gospel of John, it is recorded that Jesus, while traveling through Samaria, stopped at a well and asked a woman for water. The woman was surprised and said, "Why do you, a Jew, make a request for water to me, a woman of Samaria?" (John 4:9). From the following chapters, it is clear that this woman faced discrimination in her society. First, women were considered unclean by Jews because of natural reasons like menstruation [25]. Secondly, Samaritans were also regarded as unclean by the Jews. This woman had had five husbands and was living with a man who was not her husband at the time. In the social context of that time, she was seen as a representative of uncleanness. Her act of drawing water alone in the hot midday sun also suggests that she faced societal discrimination. Yet, Jesus did not discriminate against her and continued to preach to her.

Jesus paid equal attention to women during his ministry and healing, believing that female disciples could also receive God's grace. When Jesus was crucified, the women who came to see him off included Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and many other women from Galilee who followed Jesus. When Jesus was resurrected, he first appeared to Mary the mother of James and Joseph and Mary Magdalene, showing that women were important participants and witnesses throughout Jesus' ministry, passion, and resurrection.

Christian women could participate in church rituals, but they were excluded from such roles in Jewish and Islamic societies [26]. Women held the position of deaconesses in the early church, as mentioned in Romans 16, Philippians 1, and 1 Timothy 3, with examples like Phoebe. At that time, deaconesses were recognized and involved in church affairs, in line with religious doctrine. Additionally, Christianity promoted a certain degree of gender equality, as women were allowed to sit among men and listen to Jesus' teachings [27].

However, in the New Testament, women are also suppressed, and these statements that suppress women are mainly found in the letters of Paul. The first clear concept is that the position of men is higher than that of women. "[...] the head of every man is Christ; and the head of the woman is the man, and the head of Christ is God." (1 Corinthians 11:3). In another chapter, the relationship between husband and wife is described as: "Wives, be under the authority of your husbands, as of the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ is the head of the church, being himself the saviour of the body. And as the church is under Christ's authority, so let wives be under the rule of their husbands in all things." (Ephesians 5:22-24).

In Paul's letters, we can also find statements that require women to wear veils during religious gatherings, further limiting their religious activities [28]. In the second letter to the Corinthians, there is a rule prohibiting women from preaching in public, instructing women to behave quietly and humbly in public settings and religious groups,

and not to speak [29]. In Paul's first letter to Timothy, he sets out a code of conduct for Christian women, stating that they should be modest, self-controlled, do good, be quiet, and submissive [30]. He forbids women from performing rituals or teaching others [31]. In other words, Christian women cannot teach the people of God in church meetings like a pastor; only men are allowed to teach and lead God's people. Paul's letters clearly state that bishops and deacons should be men with only one wife [32]. "For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor" (1 Timothy 2:13-14). From this statement, it is clear that women inherited sin from Eve and are morally weak because they possess weaker spirits, intellect, and bodies, and are not particularly sensitive to sin. This portrayal of women dominated throughout the Middle Ages and even influenced the 19th century [33].

We can clearly observe many statements in Paul's letters that suppress women. However, these do not align with the historical context of his time or with the activities and practices of early Christianity. In fact, there also seems to be a contradiction between his restrictive remarks about women and his other statements, such as those supporting women becoming deaconesses. Wendell suggests that this contradiction arose because the original texts of the New Testament were altered and compiled by editors to better align with patriarchal structures. The goal was to make the church's organization more patriarchal [34].

After the apostolic era, from the late 2nd century onward, as Christianity grew, small household churches could no longer meet the demands of its expansion. The rise of the Catholic Church unified the various Christian groups and scattered household churches within the Roman Empire. Women, who had been active in household churches, were gradually marginalized. In this context, the emergence of statements in the New Testament that domesticated and marginalized women becomes more understandable. While Christianity outwardly inherited Jesus's teaching of equality among believers, in practice it imposed numerous restrictions and suppressions on women's behavior within the church. As Christianity gradually became the state religion of Western nations, these patriarchal restrictions were adopted into Western civilization [35].

From the content of the New Testament, Christianity's approach to women is not merely one of antagonistic gender discrimination but a more complex one. In addition to instances of discrimination and exclusion, the New Testament also contains more moderate forms of gender bias and even ideas that support gender equality. Jesus's attitude of equality toward women and the equal standing of female and male disciples are clear facts reflected in the New Testament. However, we cannot ignore that the compilers of the New Testament were men, and their intent to impose a patriarchal structure on the early church, which initially promoted basic gender equality, is also evident in its texts [36]. As patriarchy gradually became established, Christianity's discrimination against women became increasingly institutionalized.

### **3.2 The Social and Familial Roles Women Could Hold in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament.**

As mentioned earlier, according to the Hebrew Bible, women were not confined to their homes, and some served as leaders in Israel. Deborah, for example, was both a judge and a prophetess: "Now Deborah, a woman prophet, the wife of Lapidoth, was judge of Israel at that time (And she had her seat under the palm-tree of Deborah between Ramah and Beth-el in the hill-country of Ephraim; and the children of Israel came up to her to be judged." (Judges 4:4-5). The Bible also highlights that she was both a wife and a mother. Another example is Huldah, who was also a prophetess (2 Kings 22:14). It is possible that more Jewish women held public roles than we can confirm, but Judaism did not consider women for priestly positions, and they were generally excluded from serving as priests in Israel [37].

Meanwhile, in the Book of Proverbs, we could find early Judeo-Christian expectations for the ideal wife [38]. The woman described here loves her husband, but she is neither passive nor entirely submissive. The ideal wife is portrayed as capable of engaging in agricultural labor, sewing, and using her hard work to care for her family. Additionally, Proverbs emphasizes that the ideal wife must be kind and ready to help the poor at all times. Notably, this depiction does not focus on physical beauty, as beauty is fleeting. Instead, wisdom and reverence for God are highlighted, with a woman's "fear of the Lord" considered her greatest source of honor. This passage emphasizes the role of women as wives, mothers, and homemakers. Christianity preserved these traditional expectations of women, as seen in the New Testament, which encourages women to love their husbands [39], care for their families [40], be kind, and help the poor [41]. The New Testament also teaches that fine clothing and physical beauty are insignificant compared to devotion to God.

History shows that the traditional role of women within the family has been preserved over time. As mentioned

earlier, during the Middle Ages, Christianity promoted asceticism. In many cases, the Church regarded women dedicating their lives to religious service as nuns as more virtuous than becoming wives and mothers. However, during the Reformation, people began to reevaluate women's traditional roles as wives, mothers, and household managers.

In the history of women's education in Europe, we see how women's traditional roles were continually redefined to meet the demands of changing times. For example, in the first half of the 19th century, Hungary integrated patriotism into the traditional image of women. By emphasizing the influence of mothers and wives on their families and the nation—particularly a mother's role in educating the next generation—society required women to receive education and develop patriotism to better nurture the future of the nation [42]. Tasks such as sewing, embroidery, lace-making, making family clothing, cooking, and cleaning were considered daily responsibilities for women well into the 19th century. Handicrafts, in particular, were essential skills for women across all social classes. In 19th-century Hungarian convent schools, the goal was not only to shape female students into faithful Christians but also to prepare them to become "virtuous wives" aligned with the expectations of the era and Christian teachings.

In the early days of Christianity, women formed a significant portion of the followers and played an important role in its development. The earliest churches originated from household gatherings, as mentioned multiple times in Paul's letters. For instance, in 1 Corinthians, Paul writes, "The churches of Asia send their love to you. So do Aquila and Prisca, with the church which is in their house." (1 Corinthians 16, 19.) Paul also refers to the church in Philemon's house, the church in Nympha's house, and others. In both ancient Jewish and Greco-Roman societies, women's primary sphere of activity was the household. Many wealthy Roman women supported the early Christian movement by hosting apostles in their homes, turning their households into centers for spreading the faith and establishing some of the earliest Christian communities. For example, Paul and his companions stayed in Lydia's home, which became a center for the Christian community in Philippi. During Christianity's formative period, there were no resources to build dedicated church buildings, making household churches a common and practical form of early Christian worship. Women, such as Nympha and Lydia, could act as leaders of these household churches or co-lead them with their husbands, as in the case of Priscilla and Aquila.

As mentioned in the previous section, in early Christianity, women could serve as deaconesses. They primarily assisted with baptism, especially helping other women, and were also responsible for visiting the sick and caring for the vulnerable. However, as I pointed out earlier, Paul's letters prohibit women from preaching or having authority over men, urging them to remain quiet. Church roles such as elders and overseers were typically held by "the husband of one wife" (1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:6), and all twelve apostles were men, responsible for preaching the gospel and establishing churches. These points show that, in practice, leadership and public office in the early church were held by men, with women mostly taking on supportive and auxiliary roles.

The degradation and restriction of women in Christianity emerged during the Middle Ages. Early Church Fathers like Jerome, Augustine, and Tertullian, while diminishing the role of women, also promoted asceticism. They viewed women as the source of sin, believing that only through ascetic practices could one atone for the soul. In the Middle Ages, the role of women was shaped through the figure of the Virgin Mary, which reinforced the demand for female chastity. Within the Church framework, living an unmarried life, opposing marriage and worldly pleasures, and emphasizing chastity and faith became an accepted model for women [43]. By the later Middle Ages, this lifestyle was considered more virtuous than married life. Female saints, such as Saint Margaret of Hungary, further reinforced this ideal.

While emphasizing asceticism, the medieval Church also restricted women's religious rights. The dominance of men in the clergy was further reinforced, and women's roles in the Church and their social status were strictly limited. The 1140 *Decretum Gratiani* states, "Women cannot, however, be promoted to the priesthood or even the diaconate and for this reason they may not raise a complaint or give testimony against priests in court". (*Decretum Gratiani Causa 2, question 7, princ.*) Although female deacons were not explicitly banned, they were prohibited from marrying, and women under 40 could not become deaconesses to ensure this rule was followed [44]. The duties of deaconesses were also strictly limited, such as not being allowed to distribute the Eucharist [45]. These regulations show how severely the social status of Christian women was restricted during the Middle Ages. The *Decretum Gratiani* emphasizes women's original sin and spiritual weakness, asserting that women must obey their husbands: "As I have said before, this is because of her state of servitude, through which she has to be subject to her husband in everything." (*Decretum Gratiani Causa 33, question 5, chapter 11.*)



A turning point occurred during the Reformation. As women in Western Christianity actively participated in the Reformation and challenged the ascetic traditions of the Middle Ages. Reformers questioned the medieval image of female chastity and monastic ideals, and they revived the concept of the "virtuous wife" mentioned in Proverbs from the Old Testament, presenting a new model for women. This passage emphasized the roles of wife, mother, and household manager. The Reformation's opposition to women's celibacy and monastic ideals further highlighted women's roles and contributions within the family. Most Reformers also took a more tolerant view of women's religious duties. For example, the Quakers, with their core belief in equality, advocated for restoring the gender equality of the "Eden" period. Margaret Fell (1614-1702), a member of the Quakers, argued in her famous sermons that souls are equal regardless of gender, class, or race, and she refuted the Church's prohibition of women preaching [46]. In the 17th century, female missionaries began to emerge, with Elizabeth Hooton (1600-1672), a Quaker member, being a notable example.

In addition, women could widely participate in charitable activities. Several passages in the New Testament clearly encourage and call on women to engage in charity work. In Acts, Tabitha (also known as Dorcas) was famous for her charitable work. When she passed away, the widows she helped showed the garments she had made as a testimony of her good deeds. Her resurrection further highlighted her importance in the church [47]. The New Testament also contains teachings promoting good deeds. For example, Paul provided criteria for the widows that the church could accept and support: priority should be given to women known for their charitable works. "... if witness is given of her good works; if she has had the care of children, if she has been kind to travellers, washing the feet of the saints, helping those who are in trouble, giving herself to good works." (1 Timothy 5: 10). This passage suggests that women's charitable actions are an important reflection of their faith. Paul also believed that the wealthy should trust in God, be devout, and generously do good works [48]. He stated that all believers (including women) should do good and not expect anything in return, offering a more universal teaching [49].

#### **4. A SUMMARY AND COMPARISON OF GENDER CONCEPTS IN CHRISTIAN PHILOSOPHY AND CONFUCIAN PHILOSOPHY.**

Western religions and Eastern philosophies, through their different theories of knowledge, have reached similar conclusions about gender relations: men are regarded as the primary sex, while women are seen as the so-called secondary sex.

As mentioned earlier, traditional Chinese philosophies like Confucianism and Taoism use the complementary and interactive relationship between heaven and earth, and yin and yang, to imply the roles of men and women. Heaven and earth, or yin and yang, are ontologically equal, but within the hierarchy of these concepts, heaven is noble and earth is humble. Yang is typically associated with heaven, nobility, and movement, while yin is linked to earth, receptiveness, and stillness. Similarly, like the concepts of yin and yang, or heaven and earth, men and women are also equal, but with different attributes.

In fact, the views on gender described in the Old Testament are very similar to those expressed in early Confucianism. God created man and woman in His image, making both men and women His representatives on earth. These concepts suggest that men and women were essentially equal at the time of creation. However, men and women possess different attributes, and women were created as helpers to men. Thus, the relationship between men and women in the early chapters of Genesis reflects essential equality but includes functional and hierarchical distinctions.

On the other hand, as summarized above, both Confucianism and Christianity have undergone a process of patriarchalization.

During the Han Dynasty, Dong Zhongshu used the concept of yin and yang to justify the idea of male superiority and female inferiority. As a result, women lost their independent identity and were completely subordinated to men. The influence of Confucian rituals on women gradually shifted from relatively loose constraints to stricter controls. In the Song Dynasty, the rise of Neo-Confucianism further deepened the oppression of women in Confucian thought, even though its influence was limited before the Ming Dynasty. After Cheng Yi of the Northern Song Dynasty stated, "Dying of hunger is a minor issue, but losing one's chastity is a grave matter," the demands for women's chastity became stricter. Women were increasingly confined to domestic life and excluded from social activities, a trend that reached its extreme in the Ming and Qing Dynasties. In other words, under the rule of Confucianism, feudal society gradually abandoned the idea of gender equality found in pre-Qin Confucian thought. Instead, the gender structure of male superiority and female inferiority was reinforced, with women strictly

controlled by men. Practices such as foot-binding and the polygamous marriage system in feudal China are clear evidence of the contempt for women's dignity.

The view of women in the Hebrew Bible is contradictory, but it shows clear traces of a matriarchal society. Early Christianity, however, did not continue the negative views of women found in Judaism. For example, Christianity denied the idea that women were unclean and allowed them to participate in religious gatherings. Christianity acknowledged the equality of men and women in their human dignity, but women were still seen as inheriting Eve's sin and were viewed as humble listeners and helpers to men. Some scholars argue that the writing of the New Testament does not reflect the social reality of the time, and that the restrictions placed on women in the text were inconsistent with the active role women played in religion. Wendell attributes this phenomenon to the increasing patriarchy of the Church and believes that the suppression of women in the New Testament was likely influenced by later changes made by the editors. In the medieval period, women's roles in religion were also strictly limited and suppressed. However, during the Reformation, a lot of Reformers broke the strict regulations on women's religious activities imposed by the Catholic Church and adopted a more tolerant attitude toward women's religious roles. In fact, throughout its development, Christianity has always acknowledged the essential equality of men and women. While there has been a subordinate relationship in the division of labor between the sexes, with women consistently portrayed as helpers in religious, social, and family life, Christianity does not view the human dignity of men and women as unequal.

In terms of gender roles, both Confucianism and Christianity emphasize women's domestic duties, such as being a good wife, mother, and managing household affairs. However, their expectations for wives differ. Confucianism primarily stresses a wife's obedience and respect for her husband (especially during the Ming and Qing dynasties, when women's sexual morality was emphasized). In Confucian thought, the husband holds absolute authority over the wife. The Old Testament's ideal wife does not emphasize obedience to the husband, though the New Testament mentions that the husband is the head of the wife and the wife is the husband's helper. However, the husband is not seen as the wife's absolute authority. In Christianity, God is the absolute authority over both men and women. Women are expected to show devotion and obedience to God first, rather than to their husbands. After all, women can choose to become nuns and live outside of marriage.

We can also notice that in Confucian classics, women are expected to follow the principles of propriety, distinguishing themselves from men in various aspects of life and social activities. Women mainly bear the responsibilities and labor within the household. Christianity also emphasizes women's roles in the family, but its control and biases toward women are milder. Women have the opportunity to take on religious duties and can assume some social responsibility through participation in charitable activities.

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