

'The Female Dimension in Religions'

Music: Edward Elgar – Elegy for Strings, Opus 58 (4mins 42sec)

[Edward Elgar - Elegy for string orchestra Op. 58 \(audio + sheet music\)](#)

During Chalice Lighting

We kindle this chalice flame because there is darkness.

In our world, the shadows of injustice, oppression, hunger, and pain fill too many lives with gloom.

We light this small flame,

Not because it will vanquish all darkness,

But because it is a start;

Because rather than condemn the dark,

We have chosen to bring light.

After Chalice Lighting

The illumination of a candle is a sign of human mastery

- a reflection of our power to create, to control, and to destroy.

May this be a flame of humility

- that we may be aware of our recklessness.

May it be a flame of compassion

- encouraging us to bring light into darkness and spread warmth where cold prevails.

And may it be a flame of connection

- that we may recognise the great human family of which we are part.

1st Hymn: 194 (purple book)– 'We light the flame'

We light the flame that kindles our devotions.

We lift our hearts in blessed community.

The mind has thoughts, the heart its true emotions,

We celebrate in worship full and free.

Our faith transcends the boundaries of oceans.

All shall be granted worth and dignity.

So many ways to witness to the wonder.

So many dreams by day for us to dare.

Yet, reaching our, each way is made the grander,

and love made bold for dreamers everywhere.

Diversity will never cast asunder

our common weal, our bonds of mutual care.

Infinite Spirit, dwell with us, we pray thee,

That we may share in life abundantly.

Forgive our sins, feed us with good bread daily,

With strength resist temptation steadfastly.

O God of life, sustain us now, and may we

with mindful hearts, be thankful constantly.

Words David Andrew Usher © Used by permission Tune: 'Beamsley' David Dawson

Quotes:

“For most of history, Anonymous was a woman.” — Virginia Woolf

“You educate a man; you educate a man. You educate a woman; you educate a generation.” — Brigham Young

“There is a stubbornness about me that never can bear to be frightened at the will of others. My courage always rises at every attempt to intimidate me.” — Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*

“It's called civilization. Women invented it, and every time you men blow it all to bits, we just invent it again.” — Orson Scott Card, *The Folk of the Fringe*

“Yet what keeps me from dissolving right now into a complete fairy-tale shimmer is this solid truth, a truth which has veritably built my bones over the last few years--I was not rescued by a prince; I was the administrator of my own rescue.” — Elizabeth Gilbert, *Eat, Pray, Love*

Short Story: The Fruit Of Heaven

There was once a woman who had heard of the Fruit of Heaven. She coveted it. She asked a certain dervish, whom we shall call Sabar: ‘How can I find this fruit, so that I may attain to immediate knowledge?’ ‘You would best be advised to study with me’, said the dervish. ‘But if you will not do so, you will have to travel resolutely and at times restlessly throughout the world.’

She left him and sought another, Arif the Wise One, and then found Hakim, the Sage, then Majzup the Mad, then Alim the Scientist, and many more She passed thirty years in her search. Finally, she came to a garden. There stood the Tree of Heaven, and from its branches hung the bright Fruit of Heaven. Standing beside the Tree was Sabar, the First Dervish.

‘Why did you not tell me when we first met that you were the Custodian of the Fruit of Heaven?’ she asked him. ‘Because you would not then have believed me. Besides, the Tree produces fruit only once in thirty years and thirty days’.

Reading 1: Summing up the Christian Narrative about Women

God created both men and women in His own image and made them equal custodians of all His creation, but, because of their disobedience, God punished Adam and Eve and evicted them from the Garden of Eden. Eve's punishment was to suffer pain in childbirth and be ruled over by her husband.

Jesus broke with tradition and treated women in a much more egalitarian way than was normal in the society of that time. The early Christian churches followed Jesus' lead and gave women much higher status and more privileges than was common in the rest of the world. However, Paul and other Christian leaders continued to affirm the principle of a husband's family leadership and authority over his wife.

Christians disagree over whether this principle should apply in the modern world. Is the man's authority over his wife and family a great spiritual principle decreed by God for all time, or is it, like the Bible's teachings about slavery, just a reflection of the realities of Biblical-era culture? Today, many Christians believe women should enjoy all the same rights and privileges as men. Other Christians, however, continue to advocate a secondary role for women based on Genesis 3:16 and other Bible passages.

READING 2: On Women who Dream, p.113, by L. Annie Foerster “For Praying Out Loud: Interfaith Prayers For Public Occasions” (Edgar to bring a hard copy of this book).

2nd Hymn: 73 (purple book) – ‘If every woman in the world’

If ev’ry woman in the world had her mind set on freedom,
if ev’ry woman in the world dreamed a sweet dream of peace,
if ev’ry woman of ev’ry nation, young and old, each generation –
held her hands out in the name of love
there would be no more war.

If ev’ry man in the world had his mind set on freedom,
if ev’ry brother stood with brother as a witness for peace,
if ev’ry man of ev’ry nation, young and old, each generation –
held his hands out in the name of love
there would be no more war.

If ev’ry leader in the world shared a vision of freedom,
if ev’ry leader in the world shared a sweet dream of peace,
if ev’ry leader of ev’ry nation worked for justice and liberation,
holding his hands out in the name of love
there would be no more war.

If ev’ry nation in the world set a true course for freedom,
if ev’ry nation raised its children in a culture of peace,
if all our sons and all our daughters reached in friendship across the waters,
refusing to be enemies,
there would be no more war.

Words and Music © Karen MacKay, additional material from Nancy Nordlie and Jerome Kyles. All rights reserved. Unitarian Universalist Association (Singing the Journey)

["If Every Woman in the World" Performed by the Community Church of New York Choir](#)
(2mins 30 sec)

REFLECTIVE ADDRESS: The Female Dimension in Religions

The story of the sacred feminine is woven through the spiritual histories of Paganism, Judaism, and Christianity, three traditions often imagined in stark contrast, yet bound by a shared human yearning to understand divinity through both masculine and feminine expression. Reflecting on their trajectories reveals not only theological shifts but also changing cultural attitudes towards women, embodiment, and the natural world.

In **Pagan traditions**, the female dimension is expansive and central. Ancient polytheistic religions across Europe, the Near East, and the Mediterranean cultivated a spiritual landscape alive with goddesses who presided over fertility, war, wisdom, sexuality, protection, and the turning of seasons. The female divine was not confined to nurturing roles alone; instead, she appeared in a plurality of forms—Artemis the huntress, Isis the healer, Brigid the poet, Kali the destroyer. This diversity signalled an understanding of womanhood as multifaceted, powerful, and embedded in nature’s cycles.

Moreover, the female dimension in paganism carried an embodied quality. Rituals tied to agriculture, birth, and lunar phases connected women's experiences with cosmic patterns. The Goddess, in many cultures, symbolised the mystery of life itself: the fertile earth, the rhythmic moon, the dark womb of transformation. Paganism, therefore, offered a worldview in which female power was not derivative but intrinsic, a sacred principle in its own right. While patriarchal structures certainly existed in many pagan societies, the symbolic elevation of goddesses provided spiritual affirmation of the feminine as creative, wise, and formidable.

The emergence of **Judaism** shifted this landscape. As a monotheistic religion, it centralised divine identity into a singular, transcendent God often described in masculine terms. This move narrowed the symbolic space for explicitly feminine divine imagery yet did not erase it entirely. Traces of the sacred feminine survive within Jewish texts and mystical traditions. Figures such as **Wisdom (Chokmah)** and the **Shekhinah**, the indwelling presence of God, carry deep feminine resonance. The Shekhinah, in particular, embodies nearness, compassion, and protection, accompanying the Jewish people in exile and sanctifying the spaces where they dwell.

Still, the explicit worship of goddesses faded as Judaism established a theological boundary between itself and the polytheistic cultures surrounding it. This transition often reflected a desire for ethical monotheism rather than hostility towards femininity itself, yet its effect was the diminishing of divine female imagery in mainstream practice. At the same time, the lived reality of women in Judaism remained complex and varied. Women held crucial roles in home-centred ritual life, lighting Sabbath candles, preparing for holidays, passing on language and tradition. While rabbinic law limited women's participation in certain public religious acts, it also recognised their spiritual influence in shaping the household as a centre of holiness. Thus, the feminine, though less visible in the divine, remained an essential vessel for covenant and continuity.

With the rise of **Christianity**, the female dimension took on new forms. Christianity inherited Judaism's monotheistic framework yet reintroduced a powerful feminine presence through **Mary**, the mother of Jesus. Though not divine in Christian doctrine, Mary's symbolic status quickly expanded. She became Theotokos, the God-bearer, an image which blends humility with cosmic significance. Across centuries, Mary grew into one of the most venerated figures in Christian devotion: compassionate mother, intercessor, queen of heaven, and icon of faithful surrender. Her presence offered a spiritual counterpart to the male identities of Father and Son, providing millions of believers with a maternal connection to the sacred.

Yet Christianity also carried tensions around the female body and sexuality, shaped by early theological debates and cultural attitudes inherited from Greco-Roman society. Women's roles in leadership became restricted even as female saints, mystics, and monastics emerged as some of the most influential voices in Christian spirituality. Figures like Hildegard of Bingen, Teresa of Ávila, and Julian of Norwich expressed profound theological insight, often drawing on embodied, relational, and visionary aspects of faith that echoed ancient expressions of the sacred feminine.

Across these traditions, the female dimension has moved from central and multifaceted, to veiled yet enduring, to symbolically powerful but institutionally constrained. Still, it persists – in the pagan Goddess who embodies nature's cycles; in the Shekhinah who dwells with the exiled; in Mary who receives and bears divine mystery; and in the countless women whose lives have carried spiritual traditions forward.

To reflect on the female dimension in Paganism, Judaism, and Christianity is to recognise that the sacred cannot be contained in any single gendered image. Rather, the feminine in these traditions reveals a deeper truth, that the divine meets humanity in forms both tender and fierce, embodied and transcendent, ancient and ever-renewing.

MUSIC: Francis Poulenc – Villanelle (2mins 12 sec)

[Francis Poulenc - 'Villanelle' \(Clarinet and Piano\)](#)

Offering Prayer

This church is sustained by what we are able to bring to it:

Our time and our energy,

Our love and our resources.

The morning collection will be gratefully received immediately after the end of this service to support the work of this congregation.

A PRAYER FOR WOMEN by Beth McLendon

God smiles with love as he thinks of YOU!

You are unique in God's kingdom. There is no one like you.

No one has the talents, skills, and abilities that you have. No one has the experience that you have. No one can do the things that you can do. No one can achieve the destiny that God has for your life - except you.

And no one can replace you in God's heart. No one could ever be so special to God that God wouldn't still yearn for your company.

You are incredibly important to God. You are adorable and treasured in God's sight.

God loves you just the way you are. God thinks you are awesome, yet God is eager to help you become even more - more joyful, more contented, more mature, and more blessed. You are uniquely qualified and prepared for each day, because God is living in you and you are living inside God's love.

3rd Hymn: 146 (purple book) – 'Speaking truth in love'

Speaking truth in love, we gather
to embrace the unity
of earth's living systems, whirling
towards God's perfect liberty;
reason guided, conscience lighted,
tempered with humility.

Speaking, one unto another,
that which honours highest worth,
and which for ourselves and others
nurtures common life from birth;
just, sustaining, fair society
through the length and breadth of earth.

Speaking peace across this planet
where all living things depend
each on each, as with our neighbours,
their diversity transcend.
Honour prophets, honour Jesus,
those who welcome God as friend.

Music: 'Regent Square' Henry Smart, 1813 - 1879

Words: © Andrew M. Hill b. 1942 Used by permission

BRIEF MEDITATION ON WOMEN: (Buddhism-inspired passage)

Sit with the breath and let the mind grow still.

Reflect with gratitude on the women who sustain life with wisdom, patience, and quiet courage.

See them not as roles or expectations, but as living beings walking the same path towards freedom.

Contemplate their joys and sorrows, their strength and vulnerability, and recognise these within yourself.

Let compassion arise for all women, for those who are honoured and those overlooked, for those who suffer and those who guide others with clarity.

Hold them in boundless loving-kindness, wishing: *May all women be safe, peaceful, and free from suffering.*

POETRY (to be read by Ann)

Mirror by Sylvia Plath

I love this one, but it hurts.

Mirror

I am silver and exact. I have no preconceptions.

Whatever you see I swallow immediately

Just as it is, unmisted by love or dislike.

I am not cruel, only truthful---

The eye of a little god, four-cornered.

Most of the time I meditate on the opposite wall.

It is pink, with speckles. I have looked at it so long

I think it is a part of my heart. But it flickers.

Faces and darkness separate us over and over.

Now I am a lake. A woman bends over me,

Searching my reaches for what she really is.

Then she turns to those liars, the candles or the moon.

I see her back, and reflect it faithfully.

She rewards me with tears and an agitation of hands.

I am important to her. She comes and goes.

Each morning it is her face that replaces the darkness.

In me she has drowned a young girl, and in me an old woman

Rises toward her day after day, like a terrible fish.

Closing Words

We are blessed with an abundance of good things for we which we are truly thankful, as long as we remember them.

We are privileged with great freedom and power, for which in return we act with responsibility.

We are lucky to have shared this time and space together, because we are lucky to have

each other.

May the spirit of this place and these friends go with us into the busy city!

Closing Music: Georges Bizet – The Pearl Fishers, ‘Au font du temple saint’ (excerpt) – (6mins 16 sec – video)

[Andrea Bocelli and Bryn Terfel: Au Fond Du Temple Saint - from Bizet's Les pêcheurs de perles \(HD\) - YouTube](#)