

Review

The Black Madonna: A Theoretical Framework for the African Origins of Other World Religious Beliefs

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Abstract: This review summarizes existing scholarship in order to theorize how Abrahamic religions and Hinduism were influenced by African beliefs, in order to illuminate the contributions that African beliefs have had on other world religions. The review begins with a brief historical overview of the origins of indigenous ideologies, followed by a review of classical theories of religion and a summary of contemporary religious trends, with particular attention on African beliefs. The Black Madonna, with origins in Africa, is a prominent example of how African beliefs have been integrated into other faiths in ways that are often obscured from view. The Black Madonna is compared with the characteristics and symbolism of the traditional fair-skinned Virgin Mary. It is estimated that there are hundreds of depictions of the Black Madonna, yet her identity as truly black is generally minimized. This review contributes a theoretical rationale for the lack of recognition and acceptance of the Madonna as black, contextualizing this within a feminist theoretical viewpoint and analyzing the connection to African folklore and traditional religious beliefs. The theoretical framework articulated in this paper contributes an elucidation of the ways that indigenous African religions have affected other world religions. Acknowledging this influence challenges the simplistic notion of reified distinctions between Western and non-Western religions.

Keywords: African folk religion; Black Madonna; women and religion; religion origins in Africa

1. Introduction

Significant geographic biases exist in the study of world religions. This review of existing scholarship provides a theoretical framework for understanding how African indigenous beliefs significantly contributed to other religious ideologies. Despite such claims existing in scholarship, these influences have not received the widespread attention that they deserve. To advance a more representative understanding of global religiosity, this review addresses the study of religion with an emphasis on its historical roots in Africa. This review reports existing scholarship on religious ideology originating in Africa and then contrasts African folk religion with Hinduism and Abrahamic religions. In this review, feminist theoretical perspectives address religious beliefs through the lens of gender by considering how religious beliefs pertain to past and contemporary gender practices. A new paradigm shift is argued which addresses the gender and racial inequities in the dominant world religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

A prominent example of the lack of recognition of African influences is the cult of the Black Madonna, originating in Africa and revered in mainly a variety of European nations. By applying feminist theory, this paper argues that the Black Madonna lacks recognition due to the intersection of her gender and race, and this absence is especially notable in patriarchal religions, such as Catholicism, because of her historical roots and what she represents. A distinction is made between how the traditional Madonna is usually portrayed as the fair complexed mother of Jesus with the darker complexion of the Black Madonna, the latter of which is notably absent in Catholic Church portrayals.

The Black Madonna symbolizes strength and power, in contrast with the traditional nurturing and obedient depictions of the Mary with a fair complexion.

1.1. Origins of Indigenous Ideologies

Before reviewing classical theories and contemporary religious trends, this section first provides a brief history of the origins of indigenous ideologies. Africa, the birthplace of humankind, is where belief in the supernatural known as religion, a cultural universal, is thought to have first originated. According to archeological digs and scientific research, it is estimated that *Homo sapiens* emerged in Africa about 200,000 B.C.E. (Rito et al. 2019). Despite varied African cultures, religious beliefs and practices have transcended time. Over multiple millennia, oral traditions, rituals, and stories about gods, spirits, deities, and otherworldly events have survived despite a paucity of written texts. Since Africa led social development via group cohesion and social organization, it is likely that religious thought began in the same place. Dating back 1200 B.C.E. to 900 B.C.E., Femi Biko (2001) asserts that spiritual writings such as Vedic texts were written by descendants of migrants from Africa; migratory patterns confirmed by DNA testing demonstrate linkages to the Near East, Hebrew teachings, Christianity, and Islam. Biko claims that, because of bias, Africans were viewed as too primitive to develop complex, abstract religious ideology, and their cultural and spiritual practices were considered superstitious, irrational, and paganistic. Evolutionary inquiries into the origins of religion are not new; however, with the advent of new archeological and biological testing techniques, more scientific analysis is available such as researching mitochondrial DNA (Atran 2002) and tracing *Homo sapiens* back to one surviving genetic line that populated the world outside of Africa.

1.2. Classical Theories of Religion

This section reviews the importance of studying religious phenomena by reviewing classic theories of religion. Classical theorists contributed to answering the question: Why study religion, including the origin of religion? From a scholarly perspective, studying the source of religion, its ideologies and practices, past and present, provides a valuable record of human thought and experiences and helps guide present and future scholarship. It is in part for these reasons that social scientists studied religion in Europe during the 19th century to early 20th century in direct response to the societal changes resulting from the Industrial Revolution. Three prominent theorists during this time period were Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim, and Max Weber. Marx viewed religion critically—as an alienating force with exploitive features stemming from capitalism. For Weber, religion is variable and should be examined within a historical and cultural context (Weber 1964). Weber projected that religion would steadily erode and become ineffective by progressively becoming secularized in modern societies (Weber 1964). Emile Durkheim theorized about the distinction between what he referred to as sacred, that which has special meaning, and the profane, that which is ordinary. For example, a wafer purchased at a grocery store is profane (ordinary) yet a wafer as communion in a Christian church is sacred (holy). In 1912, Durkheim, a functionalist, was one of the first social scientists to refer to the sacred as a nonempirical force that places a moral and valuable obligation on the worshipper (Roberts and Yamane 2016). From a functionalist viewpoint, religion serves many purposes by providing social cohesiveness, defining ethics or morality, providing emotional support, and giving life meaning. What each of these three classical theorists had in common was their articulation of the important relationship between society and religion. For Marx, religion enhances the privileged status of the ruling economic class by oppressing lower social classes through its ideology; for Durkheim, religion is created by society for the benefit of its members; and, for Weber, societal patterns become important and especially crucial when contrasting social class and gender with religion (Weber 1964).

In more contemporary but still somewhat classical theories, Talcott Parsons—whose ideas were greatly influenced by Max Weber (Pals 1996)—argued that one of religion's functions is to create social values and guide members into adjusting to society's values (Parsons 1964). According to Parsons, religion makes the basic norms of society sacred (Turner 2005). Similarly, Robert Bellah, a sociologist

of religion and who was mentored by Parsons, wrote that, beyond mainstream religion reinforcing societal values, civil religion further integrates society (Bellah 2011). Turner (2005) noted that Bellah created the phrase civil religion to refer to a national belief system that performs similar functions as religion by creating solidarity, a shared belief system and rituals. For example, in the United States, printed on American currency are the words, “In God We Trust” and the Pledge of Allegiance of the United States of America includes the words, “One Nation under God.” In this way, God is integrated into the sacred values of an American way of life. Thus, according to Bellah, civil religion provides a unifying consensus of equality values and norms despite major inequalities by gender, religion, social class, race, and ethnicity. Americans value equality but do not fully engage in equitable practices.

In summary, the classical and class-contemporary theorists—like Parsons, Bellah, Marx, Weber, and Durkheim—all contributed important explanations for the role of religion in societies.

1.3. Contemporary Relevance of Classical Theories

Yet, what is the ongoing relevance of these theories for contemporary religion? As one answer to this question, Parsons (1964) asserted that the most lasting contribution of Weber’s theory of religion was his attention to the relationship between religious ideas and human conduct within a society. Weber attempted to interpret people’s actions by understanding their motives from a subjective point of view (Parsons 1964). However, any account of the classical approaches needs to critique what aspects may have been under-attended to, especially considering the Western locales of the theorists. In particular, classical theorists over-attended to the ideologies of traditional religions, such as Judaism, Christianity, Hinduism, and Islam. Notably, under-attended to in these theories are the influences of African indigenous religious ideology and practices. Despite this oversight, African traditional cultures have persisted through colonialism and conquest, which had a role in projecting images of Africans as uncivilized and inferior (Sanni 2016). In sum, Weber’s theories retain relevance insofar as they highlight the subjective elements of human practices, but they neglected non-Western religions, such as African indigenous religions.

In considering the contemporary relevance of Marx, it is important to acknowledge that Marx believed that religion was a reaction to oppression and would not survive as societies became more scientific and technologically advanced (Singleton 2014). He predicted that religion would cease to exist as societies progressed beyond capitalism; therefore, religion would have no place in modern society. In contemporary society, it appears that he erroneously predicted the collapse of capitalism, and similarly, religion has not yet been eliminated. Despite these predictive errors, Marx retains relevance for contemporary scholarship because his ideas undergirded an impetus for change among feminist religious scholars. Marx believed that religion supported the status quo by justifying inequality. For feminists, the status quo maintains a patriarchal society, which includes support for the patriarchal ideology and practices of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Simone de Beauvoir—a feminist writer and social activist who occupies a central position among feminist thinkers—applied Marx’s theories of religion toward theorizing a feminist exposition of the role that religion can have in exploitive and oppressive control of women (de Beauvoir [1949] 2011). For example, in *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir applied Marx’s ideas to religion and perceived it as encouraging women to accept their unequal status with the promise of rewards in the afterlife.

Continuing and altering this theoretical lineage, another feminist view is that it is not that religion is the cause of women’s oppression, but rather the interpretation of religious beliefs by men in positions of power who explain religious ideology to benefit themselves. This view is consistent with Maseno and Mligo (2020) who in, *Women within Religions*, expressed how patriarchy was demonstrated in many ways including androcentrism and exclusion. They write of how such male-centered views value men as the norm and devalue or exclude women’s contributions. They promoted the idea that African women feminists rejected maleness as the norm and viewed God as both female and male and women participated in religious activities as priestesses and medicine women. In the Neolithic Age (10,000 B.C.E.–5500 B.C.E.), goddess worship expanded and became organized into a religion that permeated all of society and

matrilineal descent was the norm (Perot 2008). The decline of matrilineal descent and goddess worship contributed to the ascent of patriarchy (Maseno and Mligo 2020). The elimination of goddess worship is addressed later. In African feminism, struggling against male domination is not to have an antagonistic relationship with men, but rather to have a relationship with men based on coexistence (Maseno and Mligo 2020). This was also the accepted model up to the middle of the Bronze Age when goddess worship was the norm based on equality of the sexes (Perot 2008). In sum, Marx's theories retain relevance through their impact on feminist theories that highlight the function of religious control, either through ideologies or the practices of male religious authorities. Feminist theorists draw upon Marx in asserting that, as the world rapidly changes, it is of primary importance to address the inherent inequities in the interpretation of dominant religious thought as women acquire greater political, economic, and social power. It is also noteworthy that the nature of traditional religious affiliation throughout the world is rapidly changing. In fact, after Christianity and Islam, the third-largest group contains people who have no religious affiliation and this category is expected to continue to rise (Van Tongeren et al. 2020). In light of significant social changes, it is time to reconsider traditional religious thought.

1.4. Need for a New Paradigm

Reviewing the contributions of classical theorists, such as Parsons, Bellah, Marx, Weber, and Durkheim, in combination with feminist theorists, this paper argues that a paradigm shift is needed. Historically, the classical theorists—all of whom were male—viewed religion as valued and holding great significance, especially in considering how religion connects to and regulates society. They viewed religion as intertwined with culture. In the context of an industrializing economy, the classical theorists thought that, as cultures changed throughout the world, religion would, too. In many ways, they were right, but with some important feminist qualifications. For example, women have gained considerable power in many nations throughout the world, and this is reflected in their increasingly prominent roles in political, economic, and educational institutions (UN Women 2020). Even within the family, as households become smaller, gender roles are becoming more androgynous. This is expressed by Carol Christ (1987), who stated that androcentric perspectives operate in all fields, including religious studies. She argued that society must remove the veil of androcentrism, which operates to legitimize patriarchy. In summary, a new paradigm is needed.

A new paradigm must include ways in which the contributions of women are adequately supported and recognized. By accepting such a view, scholars can address the topic of religion from a feminist viewpoint by recognizing how acceptance of the status quo perpetuates inequality; therefore, a new way of addressing and studying religion needs to be initiated and sustained. This includes recognizing the important contributions of Africans to religions of the world and accepting female figures like the Black Madonna as legitimate forms of worship. As stated by Klingorova and Havlicek (2015), gender equality is important to the economic, social, and democratic progress of the world and for the development of human society. Historically, religion has contributed to the marginalization of women and provided a platform for male domination of society as a social anesthesia and consoled women to accept their faith as the will of God (Maseno and Mligo 2020). Despite the advances women have made in education, the workplace, and the political arena, more progress is needed, especially in the domain of religion. This sentiment is echoed by Franceska Perot (2008) in the claim that women are angry at patriarchy and traditional religions, and it is time to move forward to a time of cooperation.

Collectively, classical theorists of religion recognized the important relationships between religion and society. Applying more contemporary feminist theories, scholars can contribute to positive social change by theorizing this relationship in ways that reflect equitable attention to non-Western world religions, rather than perpetuating institutional inequities that excessively focus on Western religious traditions. For instance, a contemporary application of Weber's theories about religion includes studying the different roles men and women typically have within religious organizations. Specifically, Dillon (2003) investigated whether a male view continued to dominate religious thought despite women, at least in Christian churches, having higher rates of affiliation and participation.

This phenomenon can also be studied from a feminist viewpoint since Abrahamic religions have historically been patriarchal. In the content of this review of classical theories of religion, and their contemporary relevance, this subsequent section applies these theories to the case of the Black Madonna. The central thesis is that, as women assume greater influence in positions of authority across the globe, a similar rise in power will occur within dominant world religions.

2. Review of Extant Scholarship

This section presents the results of a purposeful review of extant scholarship on the changing nature of religious affiliation and participation; religion and culture; origins of religious beliefs; the role of women; traditional religions, patriarchy, and feminist ideology; gender equities and inequities; African female figures; African influences of the Black Madonna; Africa's impact on Southern Italy; theories of Black Madonnas; and trends in traditional religions. The goal is to advance theories of religion by integrating a feminist theoretical perspective on gender into the interpretive lens.

2.1. *The Changing Nature of Religious Affiliation and Participation*

Over the past few decades, rates of Christian religious affiliation and participation have undergone significant changes. In the United States, the number of Protestants and Catholics has declined substantially, and the number of non-Christian believers has slightly increased; the largest gain has been among non-Christian practitioners ([Pew Research Center 2015](#)). In addition, practitioners of non-Christian folk religions are also projected to rise. The Pew Research Center defines folk religions as having no formal creeds or sacred texts (2015); Chinese folk religions, Native American religions, and Australian aboriginal religions are examples. The Pew Research Center mentions two important points about researching folk religions—they are challenging to measure and they frequently are not included in surveys, even in countries where they are widely practiced. The continent of Africa is one such location, in which folk religions are under-studied. Another important point about the changing nature of religious affiliation is the growing number of people who do not identify with any type of religious membership, referred to as “nones” ([Van Tongeren et al. 2020](#)). It is anticipated that worldwide, nones will grow from 1.1 billion to 1.2 billion in the next 35 years and scientific research on this group is also anticipated to increase ([Van Tongeren et al. 2020](#)). Such significant changes support the need for a new paradigm of religious thought, including ideology based on gender inclusiveness.

2.2. *Origins of Religious Beliefs*

Despite the larger lack of awareness about the integration of African folk religions, religious scholars are aware that Christianity began to spread its influence into Northern Africa around the first century C.E. since references in the literature of Ancient Egypt describe African settings and patterns of thought, including symbols and cultural artifacts ([Biko 2001](#)). Biko claims that Ethiopians and Egyptians of the ancient world were black people and that it is now firmly established by the scientific world that human life originated in East Africa, specifically in Ethiopia. How much of Christianity was influenced by African thought is unknown; however, early beliefs of traditional African religions reveal tremendous overlap and similarities. Similarities are also present in Judaism, Hinduism, and the Muslim faiths. Traditional African religions are varied but also include some common ideologies such as belief in a Supreme being who created the universe. In many stories about creation, God is depicted as analogous to a potter who creates humans out of clay and breathes life into them after putting the world into place. In African Fon mythology, children are essential in keeping deceased parents in a state of immortality by their children's remembrances ([Desmangles 1992](#)). This resembles the fact that some Christian denominations, for example, Catholicism, believe the deceased go to a place such as purgatory to repent for sins committed when alive, and relatives can offer prayers in their memory to relieve them of time in this suspended state, prior to going to heaven. Desmangles compares the African Virgin Ezili, a pure mother, with the Virgin Mary of Christianity. In Islam, Mary is revered as the mother of Jesus and she is also mentioned frequently in the Koran.

In Hinduism, a Supreme being is both male and female and Devi, a female goddess, is analogous to the Virgin Mary who is held in high regard by Muslims and Catholics. These examples highlight the origins of many world religious beliefs within African folk religions.

Furthermore, many Haitians practice a blending of Vodou and Catholicism which includes blended rituals. In Vodou, 15 July is celebrated as a day to remember the apparition of the Virgin Mary outside the town of Ville-Bonheur in Haiti ([Desmangles 1992](#)); for Catholics, the feast day of Our Lady of Mt. Carmel is 16 July; and in Hinduism, Sarasvati Puja, ancient goddess of wisdom and knowledge, is widely worshipped at the beginning of spring. Santeria practices are not acknowledged by the Catholic Church as legitimate, yet many Santeria saints are the same as Catholic saints, such as St. Anthony, St. Joseph, and the Virgin Mary, the mother of Jesus, who is one of the most venerated. Santeria originated in Nigeria as part of the African Yoruba religion ([Perot 2008](#)). In African folk religion, God is viewed as a Supreme being and lesser gods assist in the distribution of duties. In Santeria, God is creator and lesser deities, as saints, assume the same roles as lesser gods. Santeria, like Vodou, includes worship, trance, and dance. These are some examples of how practices and beliefs overlap among Hinduism and Abrahamic religions and Africa folk religion. What is emphasized is that African spiritual stories parallel those of more recognized religions, yet their contributions are generally ignored. Why? One potential explanation is that when slaves arrived from West Africa to the Caribbean, slave owners baptized them as Catholic and banned them from practicing their African faith. The African slaves found similarities between their gods and Catholic saints, making it relatively easy for them to continue their own ways of worship by simply renaming their gods. As people emigrated to other places such as the U.S.A., they imported their religious beliefs. In this way, African folk religions spread worldwide. Despite the diffusion of the ideology of African folk religion, it remained devalued and largely ignored. It is only within the past few decades that religious scholars are beginning to pay attention to the contributions of African religious thought ([Sanni 2016](#)). A comparison can also be made between African folk religion and the role of women in religious practices. In Abrahamic religions, women lack full recognition and their contributions are generally minimized.

2.3. *The Role of Women*

When reviewing data about religion, studies consistently demonstrate greater rates of religious participation among women, compared to men, despite Abrahamic religions' inherent male dominance. It is typical for religious norms and practices to reflect patriarchal beliefs which are characteristic of most societies, including the role of God as a male figure ([Klingorova and Havlicek 2015](#)). When a woman has a special religious role such as Mary, mother of Jesus, it is generally one of nurturer, protector, and helper, and her role is considered subservient to God's. She is expected to be obedient to His wishes and rarely does she act independently. An illustrative example of this is the importance of the role of the Madonna and the depiction of her as the Black Madonna, which contrasts symbolically with the traditional Virgin Mary. Like the fair-skinned Virgin Mary, the Black Madonna is revered in different parts of the world, mainly in Europe, yet her importance as a strong and powerful female spiritual figure is generally under-recognized or minimized. Why? Part of the rationale for this dismissal is the Black Madonna's origin in Africa. At the same time, fair-skinned Mary was perceived as the "acceptable" Mother of Jesus: docile, innocent, and reflective of goodness ([Perot 2008](#)).

Abrahamic religions tend to be sexist, and, generally, they are racially exclusive ([Harrison 2007](#)). Even in religious scholarship, rarely are indigenous beliefs such as African folk religion included in studies; little attention has been paid to the contributions of early civilizations to major religions of the world ([Chitando 2005](#)). In addition, the blending of accepted religions combined with folk religion is equally under-attended ([Chitando 2005](#)). Frequently, the inclusion of folk religion in any form is downplayed because of perceived contradictory ideology and the demonstrative style of worship such as dancing, chanting, and emotional display of reverence since such overt pageantry has been regarded as paganistic and superstitious, and is rarely honored for its subjective display of devotion ([Berry 1988](#)). In fact, during the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century, Calvin banned

all images, dancing, singing, use of incense and bells, and boisterous behavior—all associated with the feminine values of joy, love, mercy, and beauty (Perot 2008). Luther was similarly austere by rejecting devotion to the Virgin Mary since women were viewed as tainted with Eve's original sin; therefore, all of Eve's descendants were inherently evil and needed to be submissive to their fathers and husbands (Perot 2008). In summary, one reason for the important role of African folk religion being under-acknowledged is because the strength of female power is a threat to religious patriarchy. The Black Madonna is the embodiment of such a view.

2.4. Traditional Religions, Patriarchy, and Feminist Ideology

Feminist theorists view Abrahamic religions as oppressive to women (Harrison 2007). In religious texts, such as the Old Testament of the Bible, women are frequently viewed as inferior or sinners while men are presented in a positive light. Five examples of this are reviewed. (1) Eve is regarded as a temptress, the one who seduced Adam to eat the forbidden fruit. She is the evil one whose actions separated humankind from the divine (Perot 2008). Some interpretations of the Bible suggest that women experience pain in childbirth because it is God's way of punishing women for their sinfulness. (2) In some religions, menstruation is considered unclean; therefore, men stay afar during this time and, in some cultures, the menstruating woman is forbidden from entering houses of worship or touching holy books. (3) In Orthodox Judaism, a man's prayer in the morning may include thanking God for not making him a woman, and during religious services, men and women pray separately (Ronen 2017). (4) In Islam, men sit in the front of the mosque and women in the back or in a separate room (Nyhagen 2019). (5) In Roman Catholicism, only men can be priests and women cannot hold any high-ranking positions of authority (Hornbeck 2011).

In summary, three assumptions are touted in the traditions of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam that support the claim of male superiority: (1) God's primary creation is a man and not a woman; (2) a woman was responsible for expulsion from the Garden of Eden, hence, all of Eve's daughters are regarded with suspicion and contempt; and (3) a woman was created *from* a man and *for* a man (Hassan 2001). In addition, Hassan stated that prominent identification of women was with their bodies rather than their minds and spirit; this is a common feature of many religious traditions. She also noted that such identification did not equate to ownership of a woman's body, since an underlying issue was whether such ownership should be controlled by men, the state, the community, or the Church. These examples are a few illustrations of how women are demoralized, devalued, segregated, and marginalized based on the interpretation of religious texts and ideologies. Thus, women are viewed as fundamentally evil and lure men into sin (Perot 2008).

2.5. Gender Equities and Inequities

Mainstream Abrahamic religions were not always male-centered; it was the rise of male-dominated, monotheistic religions—Christianity, Islam, and Judaism—that led to the oppression of women in religion. Many early religions had important goddesses and other female figures that over time disappeared or became taboo (Birnbaum 2000). One exception is Hinduism which honors many female figures (Timothy and Olsen 2006).

Dating back to the Paleolithic era (20,000 B.C.E.) sites have been discovered from Spain to Siberia with statues and images of the divine feminine and representative of the essential role women played in religious rituals and temples (Perot 2008). Perot made note of striking similarities in goddess statues up to 4300 B.C.E. to 2800 B.C.E. at which time invaders engaged in violent conquests across Europe and Asia which led to the decline of goddess worship. Up to this point in time, there were no tribal male gods—only universally worshipped goddesses until male dominance and violence became the norm, and powers were assumed by male gods such as Zeus, powerful god of the sky, married to Hera, perceived as an ineffective and jealous wife (Perot 2008). Such negative perceptions of women became the norm and, subsequently, Hebrew prophets and priests saw as their duty to turn people away from goddess worship and made such images forbidden (Perot 2008).

The conflict between masculine and feminine conceptions of divinity is not new, and to varying degrees can be found in most, if not all civilizations (Markale 1999). Jean Markale wrote of how a transformation from a gynocratic state to an androcratic or patriarchal state led to a transformation of the mother goddess into the father god. Like the worship of Zeus, he referred to the legend of the Delphic shrine as a significant event in which the god Apollo fought and killed a serpent named Python who lived in the area of Delphi. According to this legend, the inhabitants of the region abandoned the Python cult and devoted themselves to Apollo. Over time, the python became equated with the female nature of the serpent and was cursed; the curse against the serpent extended to the mother goddess herself. Markale considered the original sin of the Bible (Eve succumbing to the serpent) as the turning point in the history of consciousness consisting of the struggle between the mother goddess and the father. God, the father in control, emphasizes order and control, whereas that which is feminine is viewed as chaotic, destructive, demonic, and to be feared and mastered (Perot 2008). These are some examples of the movement away from goddess worship and the beginning of a movement toward patriarchy. The Old Testament and its three religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—are all examples of patriarchy and each of them has an imageless father god (Perot 2008). Other examples of the movement away from the power of women to patriarchal ideologies are the sacred sites which were tributes to goddesses such as Isis and Inanna. Subsequently, churches were built in these same locations. Many are Catholic churches, part of a highly organized patriarchal hierarchy that is oppressive to women (Harrison 2007). There are hundreds of articles and books about gender inequities inherent in religions (e.g., Ronen 2017; Nyhagen 2019; Thompson 2019; Salili 2020, etc.); however, the point is that, in the past, women were a dominant spiritual force (Birnbbaum 2001). Prior to Aryan and Semetic invasions, goddess worship was prominent and based on an equitable relationship with all beings until the patriarchal systems of late Greece, Rome, and Christianity were implemented (Perot 2008). The Black Madonna is a primary example of dominant female spirituality which has withstood the test of time, yet she has been gravely under-attended by traditional religious organizations. There are also other beliefs that support the important roles women play and have played in religion and many of them can still be found in various locations in Africa.

2.6. African Female Figures

Throughout history in some cultures, women were portrayed as a dominant force, despite their power being under-valued by males in positions of authority. For example, in traditional African folk religion, God of the Ewe in Ghana is represented by twins, one female and one male, and the image of God is Mawu, a statue with large breasts; the Akan, also of Ghana, view women as the mother of humankind—a goddess (Wright 1999). The Akposso of Togo believe that when God made humans, the first was a woman who bore the first child (Wright 1999). In most African societies, the earth is depicted as female and, during harvest, a festival is held in her honor. The Igbo of Nigeria dedicate shrines to the Mother goddess, the Queen of the underworld, who is responsible for morality, and the Mende of Sierra Leone regard the goddess Mother Earth as not only the mother of mankind but also the wife of God (Wright 1999). In summary, God is frequently viewed as female in African folk religions, and she was the first of humankind who bore a child. Shrines are dedicated to her and special ceremonies take place in her honor. The Mother Goddess is the teacher of morals and sometimes viewed as the wife of God. Even in Latin, the word earth, “terra”, is a feminine noun. The key point is that some traditional African folk religion practices honor women and engage in dialogue about how she can also take her rightful place in dominant Abrahamic religions. Just like African religious thought being devalued worldwide, so too is the role of women within Abrahamic religions.

2.7. African Influences of the Black Madonna

Worthy of investigation is how depictions of the Black Madonna are connected to her origins in Africa and how much her role as an important female spiritual figure is under-acknowledged. Many rituals, beliefs, traditions, and ways of life have roots in Africa and some scholars claim that

dominant traditional religions have their beginnings in Africa or were greatly influenced by the ideologies of Africans (Grillo et al. 2019; Birnbaum 2001). As Africans were viewed as incapable of complicated ideologies for centuries, their contributions to spiritual beliefs were not seen.

In places such as Southern Italy, there are shrines dedicated to the dark-skinned Madonna, and veneration of her is still very much practiced; many of these observances are rich in traditional customs and reflective of specific regions with African influences (Birnbaum 2000). Such rituals have remained extensive and illustrate how her multiple depictions blended with cultural and traditional beliefs. The Mediterranean islands and coastal areas of Italy resisted invading cultures that brought male-dominant religions. Ancient beliefs held thousands of years before the common era have never been obliterated (Birnbaum 2000). This illustrates the long-standing importance of the Black Madonna originating in Africa and over millennia traveling to mainly different parts of Europe and in different points in time. The depiction of the Madonna as black is a representation that is not the same as the white Madonna. The white Madonna is saintly, holy, and representative of a special woman revered by Christians and Muslims as the mother of God. The image of the Black Madonna is a symbol for everyone; she is nurturing and “counters racism and sexism” (Birnbaum 2000). The Madonna as black is perceived as holding a greater place of importance and perhaps even God herself, even though to some she is the same Madonna as the white one but just a darker version.

Here it is argued that such a role representing a dominant spiritual force is suppressed by patriarchal religions because of what the Black Madonna represents. It is in sub-groups such as Southern Italians, practitioners of Vodou of Haiti, and Santeria of the Caribbean, to name just a few, who hold her in high regard. Like Hinduism, most traditional African religions do not base their beliefs on the superiority of men nor on the separation and degradation of women. African religions are also a reminder of a statement made by feminist theorist M. Jacqui Alexander, “Amnesia that domination produces; the costs of collective forgetting, is so deep that we have forgotten that we have forgotten . . . some of the most inclusive and visionary ideas have been formulated by those on the margins, those excluded from formal political power, stigmatized, semi-literate, backward, and illegal” (Alexander 2006). This is comparable to what is referred to as liberation theology of Italians who differentiate themselves from the Vatican by declaring that “we are the church” in the hope for individual and social transformation (Birnbaum 2000). Birnbaum found that in different locations the Black Madonna was prayed to for assistance in freedom from suppression. She noted that Our Lady of Guadalupe inspired the Mexican Revolution of 1810, and, in parts of Texas and Mexico, she was venerated more than Jesus or God the Father as the most potent religious, political, and cultural image of Chicanos and Mexicans. Birnbaum also referenced how posters of the Black Madonna of Czestochowa were visible everywhere in Poland during the solidarity liberation movement against unjust Soviet communist rule. Birnbaum wrote of how the Black Madonna was a role model for women, embracing her as powerful and one who could liberate them from varied and oppressive roles. It is the symbolism of the Black Madonna that made her so appealing to the downtrodden by offering hope and freedom from inequality.

2.8. Africa’s Impact on Southern Italy

As mentioned above, Southern Italy is ripe with customs and traditions of the past which are still practiced today including worship of the Black Madonna, a dark-skinned Mary, Mother of infant Jesus, also portrayed as black. Around 10,000 B.C.E., before the rising of the sea, Southern Italy, Sicily, France, and Spain were part of the continent of Africa and many artifacts of African influences remain (Birnbaum 2012). In Southern Italy, the intense veneration and celebration of the Black Madonna by local townspeople is evident as they come together to reenact miracles of this deity. Since most images of the Virgin Mary portray her as light skinned, her presentation as a dark figure is intriguing. In art and in churches, there are many Black Madonnas and, every year, throngs of worshippers visit the shrines in Southern Italy devoted to the Black Madonna, in places such as Sorrento, Positano, Foggia, Benevento, Calabria, Tindari, and Seminara. Each site has its own folklore and following and some of them include African traditions and/or music (e.g., in Foggia, Seminara, and Tindari). In Tindari,

a Christian sanctuary was built on the same site where Africans fought invaders. Inscribed on the pedestal of the carved wooden Black Madonna of Tindari in Sicily, are the words, “Nigra sum sed Formosa”, (I am black but beautiful), illustrating the enduring legacy of dark mothers of primeval Africa (Birnbaum 2012). Birnbaum notes that this statue is near the site of the ancient goddess Demeter and the inscription is in reference to the “Song of Songs” in Hebrew scriptures. Birnbaum (2000) relays how the Catholic Church rejects the significance of the Black Madonna, illustrating how she is viewed as separate from the belief system of worshippers who venerate her for something other than just the mother of Jesus. It is this “other” interpretation of the Madonna that is rejected by traditional Christianity yet venerated by many who consider her to be a powerful figure and, in some instances, more powerful than her son—as God in her own right. Viewing the Madonna as non-white rejects the patriarchy of dominant religious thought and supports the idea that the Madonna is a powerful figure that has perhaps existed since creation as Mother of the Earth, Mother to humankind, and a symbol that has transcended time. It is the return of the African divine feminine that can assist in achieving equality within Abrahamic religions and other societal institutions. For millennia, a patriarchal society has ruled to the exclusion of the divine feminine who was peacefully worshipped before being replaced by a warrior father god due to the influence of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, which relegated women to second class citizens; it is time to balance the masculine and feminine in order to bring the world to order (Perot 2008).

3. Theories of Black Madonnas

Because of reluctance on the part of traditional Christianity and the Catholic Church to accept the idea that the Madonna is black (Georgieff 2016), there is an array of theories as to why she is depicted as such in statues, paintings, and icons (Begg 2006; Birnbaum 2000, 2001). These views are attempts at discounting her prominent role. Some theories involved the belief in secrets held by the Catholic Church and mysteries involving the cult of the Black Virgin as a representation of equal rights for women (Begg 2006). Traditional Madonnas represent purity and obedience, whereas Black Madonnas are strong and powerful. One type of denial in explaining why the Madonna is black is because she has darkened over time due to age, smoke, and grime (Georgieff 2016). An older theory suggested that she really was white but was then considered black because of age and environmental conditions. In some cases, such as Madonnas in Avellino and Lucera, Italy, Black Madonnas have been painted white (Birnbaum 2000). Another theory is that she represents the indigenous population of a region such as Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico. This is logical because Our Lady of Guadalupe is honored in Mexico, a nation of darker-toned people; however, this does not explain her hue in other Madonna representations. Since there is not one common belief of what Mary looked like, it is reasonable to accept the artist’s point of view in creating a Mary or a Madonna which looks like people within one’s own culture. Examples of this can be found in Jacqueline Orsini’s (Orsini 2000) depiction of numerous Madonnas in which the watercolor painting of Mary and Child in China has Asian features sitting under a flowering tree whereas Paul Gauguin’s *La Orana Maria* (Ave Maria) has Tahitian features placed in a tropical setting. Orsini’s book is an example of how artists have depicted the Madonna as connected to many and varied cultures.

There are more than five-hundred known Black Madonna statues and paintings worldwide and Ean Begg speculated that devotion to Mary developed from the esoteric popular religion common among the Templars and Cathars which was forced underground and deemed heretical. At the center of their beliefs was the divine feminine and the perception of women as compassionate, intelligent, and possessing social roles other than wife (Perot 2008). Much scholarship about the Black Madonna argued that Templars were responsible for bringing statues and paintings back from the Holy Land during the Crusades; there are Black Madonnas in numerous Templar cathedrals and churches and they are vividly apparent in the Cathedral of Notre Dame de Chartres in France which has three. Similar to Birnbaum, Carol Winters (2006), claimed that the Catholic Church remained silent about the origins and presence of the Black Madonna because she represents the feminine principle that started

at the dawn of human consciousness as Mother Earth from whom all life emanated. This is consistent with African folk religion viewing God as female, creator of humankind. Begg viewed her almost unknown status as one of disinterest on the part of scholars and art historians or her depictions are considered crude, difficult to examine or date, or even grotesque. He made this claim by stating that a large proportion of ancient miraculous Madonnas of the world are black, yet so little is known about their existence. The exception is the Black Virgin of Padua because it is by the famous Italian artist, Donatello. Making note of the distinction between the Black Madonna and other depictions of Mary is significant because of the symbolism behind both types of representation. The Black Madonna is associated with Mother, Creator, and Protector of the Earth, a supreme advisor, one who understands the struggles of life, and a spiritual intervening force. Light-skinned or local cultural Madonnas are important too; however, the connotations associated with them are as the Mother of God, obedient to His will, living a life of virginity, pure, without sin, and the holiest of holy. She too answers prayers and understands sorrow and pain, especially the type of pain she experienced when her Son was crucified.

In discussing how the Catholic Church needed to alter doctrine for the suppression of women's roles to be maintained, Perot (2008) noted how it was necessary for Jesus to be born via an immaculate conception in order to be free of original sin; subsequently, Mary ceased to be mortal since, in 1854, the Church declared that she too was not conceived in original sin. This provided rationale for dissociation from Eve, portrayed as sinful, and subsequent association with Mary, a virgin, sinless and pure. In fact, in 431 A.D., at the Council of Ephesus, the same location where the repressed goddess temple Artemis once stood, Mary was proclaimed by the Christian fathers as "God-bearer" (Perot 2008). About one hundred years earlier, the Cathars and Gnostic traditions were suppressed, in which a climate of tolerance prevailed, and God was perceived as both mother and father and women held equal rank with men (Perot 2008).

4. Discussion

This section discusses several trends in traditional religions as the basis for articulating a new African feminist theory of religion that advances beyond classical shortcomings.

4.1. Trends in Traditional Religions

Worship of the Black Madonna remains primarily in Europe, yet rates of Christian affiliation continue to decline. The Pew Research Center (2015) estimates that the Christian population in Europe will drop by about 100 million people, falling from 553 million in 2010 to 454 million in 2050. A similar pattern exists in the U.S.A. with a downward trend in weekly church attendance and affiliation of Christians. Catholic affiliation has also declined; currently 20.8 percent from 25 percent just a decade ago; however, growth in the Hispanic population has overshadowed much of the decrease (Lipka and Gecewicz 2017). According to a recent Gallup Poll, it is not only Catholicism that has declined in membership in the United States; the decline in the number of Christians corresponds to the rise in Americans who claim no religious affiliation (Lipka and Gecewicz 2017). People who identify as atheists or agnostics, and those who say their religion is "nothing in particular" now account for a combined 23 percent of the adult population (up from 16 percent in 2007). This trend has occurred across many demographic groups (men, women, older, younger, different levels of education, different races and ethnicities). The share of Americans who identify as non-Christian has increased by only one percent since 2007—up from five percent to six percent and is predominately Muslim and Hindu. In addition, more Americans now say they are spiritual rather than religious. According to Hackett and McClendon (2017), about 27 percent of Americans think of themselves as spiritual which is up eight percent in the past five years. This, too, has occurred across a wide spectrum of the population and not specific to any one demographic group. The number of adult Americans who view themselves as religious (54 percent) has gone down by eleven percent since 2012. These statistics mirror the belief that a growing number of Americans say it is not necessary to believe in God to be moral and have good values—56 percent, up from 49 percent in 2011 (Smith 2017). "A lot of people don't want to be

part of an organized religious community which they see as formal, traditional, dictatorial, boring, and predictable,” according to Reverend Elizabeth Lerner Maclay, a lifelong Unitarian Universalist (Ahmad 2013). Conversely, adherents of various folk religions—including African traditional religions, Chinese folk religions, Native American religions, and Australian aboriginal religions—are projected to increase by 11 percent, from 405 million to nearly 450 million. Regarding religious practices and affiliations, perhaps we are now going in a more inclusive direction which may include greater gender equality.

Lucia Birnbaum (2012) stated that Africa has given the world values that existed before and they currently have crucial relevance for a world that faces spiritual and actual extinction; Africans have kept their connection with the earth, maintaining matriarchal families and an oral tradition transmitted by mothers to their children. Birnbaum also mentioned the work of Emmanuel Anati, who in 1999, substantiated in rock art the premise that Africans were the founders of Abrahamic religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Even in India, a country with less than three percent Christians, the Madonna was venerated by millions of Hindus and other non-Christians (Ghosh 2013). Palash Ghosh (2013) related this phenomenon to the adoration of mother goddess figures such as Durga and Kali; people see Mary as a figure who can answer their prayers and one in which divine intervention is sought. She applied this great devotion to Mary as a type of universality in the world’s faiths that sometimes is obscured in the long-standing debates between the East and the West. In addition, other cultures continue to maintain an unbroken tradition of goddess worship such as Native Americans, some Southeast Asians, and Tibetans (Perot 2008). If scholars have greater insight into people’s religious beliefs, careful attention to historical information and contemporary data can help bridge the time gap between the past and the present (Zaccaria 2010).

Woodhead (2012) reports that the World Values and European Values Surveys which were collected between 1995 and 2001 found that gender equality is linked to economic growth, legal reforms, and, above all, religiosity and religious values reflected in cultural factors. Woodhead’s (2012) implication was that religion is a system of power that can either reinforce existing power relations or attempt to change them. Women have made gains in equality in many dimensions of life such as in the workplace and in the political arena (Al-Kohlani 2018), yet at the same time, equality in some patriarchal religions remains elusive, while in others we see the beginnings of significant change. Notably, women still cannot become priests in Catholicism, nor can they be rabbis in Orthodox Judaism or lead men in prayer in Islam. Yet, in the Episcopal Church, women are now priests and, in Reform Judaism, women are rabbis. Power relationships are changing as women receive greater recognition for their worth and societal contributions (Al-Kohlani 2018). The argument here is consistent with the economic model proposed by Catherine Wessinger (2020), who views socio-economic factors as supporting gender roles in conjunction with religious norms. She considers a gendered division of labor as reinforcing gender inequality. Yet, since the socio-economic situation is changing for the better, religion is supporting the transition toward women’s equality. A society’s gender roles are reflected in and reinforced by religious narratives, myths, concepts of divinity, and religious leadership roles and whether they are accessible to women; therefore, as women access higher levels of education and achieve greater economic earnings, they can assert their right to equality (Wessinger 2020). Similar recognition is true for folk religions. As rates of Christian affiliation decline, it is anticipated that membership in folk religions, including African folk religions, will increase in membership.

4.2. *Advancing a New African Feminist Theory of Religion*

This review explored the historical representation of how African religious beliefs influenced the dominant world religions of Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism. Despite this relevance, African religious thought has been under-acknowledged. It is only within the past several decades that a few religious scholars recognize how varied African religious beliefs contributed to dominant religions. An example of how African contributions are typically dismissed is the existence of hundreds of representations of the Black Madonna, mother of Jesus Christ, found predominately in a few

European countries such as Italy, Spain, and France, yet her origin in Africa and existence in other places is widely unknown. An important distinction is made between the typical image of Mary, Mother of Jesus, as fair skinned in contrast with the darker version, the Black Madonna. This is significant because of the symbolism of the traditional Mary as obedient and subservient to God, the father and protector of her son, whereas the Black Mary is independent, strong, powerful, and Mother of the universe. It is also this darker version of Mary that is not recognized by the Catholic Church. In some instances, Black Madonnas were painted white to make her resemble traditional Madonnas, denying her existence and reinforcing the submissive role Abrahamic religions expect women to play. The claim is made here is that strong female figures such as pre-Christian goddesses, Black Madonnas, and women portrayed in African folk religion have been devalued because they do not represent the status quo of patriarchal religions. Since a strong connection exists between religion and culture and society, traditional religious beliefs have been supported by maintaining gender inequities. It is the continued interpretation of religious dogma in favor of men that has contributed to the limitation of women's roles in patriarchal religions. As rates of Christian affiliation plummet and adherents of folk religion are expected to increase along with people who claim to be spiritual but not connected to any one religion, a paradigm shift is needed. There is tremendous overlap among world religions and a common thread of devotion to Mary, regardless of her coloring, is found in Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism—all major world religions. It is suggested that such commonality be embraced and to question the interpretation of religious dogma that maintains gender inequity. It is important to remember that religions were not always male-centered.

Important female figures, such as goddesses, disappeared or became taboo once monotheistic Abrahamic religions achieved cultural significance and, in so doing, devalued the role of women.

In summary, it is argued that a paradigm shift is needed. Scholars need to recognize the ongoing cultural significance of African folk religions in other world religions. Doing so will elevate attention to the role of strong women in indigenous theology. Awareness of these important issues will aid in rectifying the relationship between feminist and classical theories. Worldwide, women are gaining political power as they assume important roles. Marginalized groups are gaining greater recognition. As early theorists of religion proclaimed, religious ideology affects the practices of everyday life within societies by shared culture and symbols. Social science researchers can advance literature devoted to the study of African religious traditions, gender, and religion by addressing voids in research about the complex relationship between gender roles, culture, and religion.

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