

Cambridge AS & A Level · Sociology 9699 · Notes

Gender, feminism and religion A2

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What you need to know

By the end of this topic you should be able to explain and evaluate:

1. **Feminist perspectives on religion.** How liberal, radical, Marxist and other feminists (including feminists writing from inside a faith) see religion: mainly as a tool of male power, or as something women can reshape and use.
2. **Explanations for patriarchy and gender inequality in religion.** Why most large religions have been led by men and have taught that women's place is different and lower: history, scripture and how it is read, ideology, the organisation of religious bodies, ideas about the body and purity, and the influence of patriarchy in the wider society.
3. **Moves towards gender equality, and benefits to women.** How far religious organisations are changing (women clergy and leaders, new interpretations, women-led groups), whether the change is real or only on the surface, and the evidence that taking part in religion can give women real gains.

What this note assumes. The prerequisite note *Religion and society* explains how religiosity is measured, why women in Western Christianity are on average **more religious** than men, and the main theories of religion (functionalist, Marxist, Weberian, postmodern). This note builds the gender debate on top of that. It keeps returning to one puzzle: **women are the majority of worshippers in many faiths, yet men hold most of the power.**

Understand it

Key ideas

- **Patriarchy:** a social system in which men as a group hold more power, status and resources than women, and in which this is presented as natural or sacred.
- **Gender inequality in religion** can sit at four levels. Keep these apart in every essay, because evidence about one level says little about another:

Level	The question to ask	An example to use
Word: scripture, doctrine, images of God	What do the texts and teachings say about women?	God described as Father and King; Eve tempting Adam in Genesis
Office: leadership and authority	Who may lead worship, teach, rule and decide doctrine?	an all-male Catholic priesthood; male rabbis in Orthodox Judaism
Rite and space: worship, rituals, buildings	Where may women stand, and what may they do?	separate galleries or screens; rules about menstruation
Life: home, body and law outside the building	What do religions expect of women in family, sexuality and public life?	teaching against contraception and divorce; limits on girls' schooling

- **Ordination:** the formal making of a person into a priest, minister, rabbi or other religious leader. Who can be ordained is the clearest test of the **office** level.
- **Feminisation of religion:** women forming a growing share of worshippers and, more recently, of clergy.
- **Stained-glass ceiling:** Paul Sullins's (2000) term for the barrier that keeps ordained women in junior, part-time or less well-paid posts, even where the rules let them rise.
- **Religious feminism:** women working for equality **from inside** a faith, by reinterpreting its texts or using its resources, rather than rejecting it.

Feminist perspectives on religion

Feminists agree that most religions have been shaped by men; they disagree about whether religion can be repaired.

- **Simone de Beauvoir** (*The Second Sex*, 1949) argued that religion gives men a sacred backing for their authority, and gives women a **compensation** for their lower status: suffering patiently in this life is promised a reward in the next. This is close to Marx's idea of religion as comfort for the oppressed, but the oppressed group is women, not a class.
- **Radical feminists** see religion as one of the deepest roots of patriarchy, because it presents male power as the will of God. **Mary Daly** (*Beyond God the Father*, 1973) put it in one line: if God is male, then the male is God. She argued that Christianity was so built around male symbols that women should leave it and look for a woman-centred spirituality.
- **Marxist feminists** link religious teaching on the family to capitalism as well as to men. Teaching that a wife's duty is the home supplies employers with workers who are fed, clothed and raised at no cost to them, and keeps women as a cheap, flexible reserve of labour.
- **Liberal feminists** think religions can be reformed. They campaign for women's ordination, for **inclusive language** in prayers and Bible translations ("brothers and sisters" rather than "brothers"), and for equal places on governing bodies. They point to how much has changed since the 1970s.
- **Feminist theology** works from inside faiths. **Rosemary Radford Ruether** (*Sexism and God-Talk*, 1983) reread Christian tradition to recover its message of equality. Muslim feminists such as **Fatima Mernissi** argued that early Islam gave women rights that later male scholars narrowed, and **Amina Wadud** led a mixed congregation in Friday prayer in New York in 2005.

- **Feminists of difference** (often women outside the West) warn against judging every religion by Western standards. A practice that looks oppressive to an outsider, such as veiling, may mean something else to the woman who chooses it.

Why is religion so often patriarchal? Six explanations

Strong essays do not just show **that** religion is patriarchal; they explain **why**, and ask whether religion is the cause or only the carrier.

1. **History: the goddess was pushed aside.** Karen Armstrong (*A History of God*, 1993) traced how many early religions worshipped goddesses and had priestesses, and how the rise of the monotheistic faiths (one male God) went with societies in which men controlled land, war and writing. On this view patriarchal religion is a historical product, not the only form religion can take.
2. **Interpretation: men wrote and read the texts.** Nawal El Saadawi (*The Hidden Face of Eve*, 1980), an Egyptian doctor and feminist, argued that women's oppression in Muslim societies comes from patriarchal **interpretations** of Islam by men, and from older patriarchal customs, rather than from the faith itself. For centuries scripture was copied, translated and explained almost only by men, so the readings that won favoured men.
3. **Ideology: sacred backing for male power.** Radical and Marxist feminists argue that religion turns a social arrangement into a divine order. Passages such as the creation of Eve from Adam's side, Eve's part in the Fall, or the New Testament letters telling wives to submit (Ephesians 5) and women to keep silent in church (1 Corinthians 14) have been used to justify men's authority in church and home.
4. **Organisation: who controls the institution.** Religious bodies are large, old organisations. Those who hold office train, select and ordain the next generation, so a male leadership tends to reproduce itself. The Catholic and Orthodox churches defend the male priesthood as a matter of **tradition**: Jesus chose twelve male apostles.
5. **The body: purity and pollution.** Jean Holm (*Women in Religion*, 1994) showed how many religions treat menstruation and childbirth as making women ritually unclean, which keeps them away from the most sacred places and tasks. In India, women aged 10 to 50 were kept out of the Sabarimala temple until the Supreme Court ruled against the ban in **2018**, a ruling met with mass protest.
6. **Wider society: religion reflects patriarchy.** Religion grows up inside societies that are already patriarchal and absorbs their customs. On this view religion **reflects** gender inequality more than it **causes** it, which is why the same faith can look very different in different countries. Functionalists give a gentler version: religions divide roles between men and women in a way that suited traditional family life (Parsons's **instrumental** and **expressive** roles), and see the division as complementary rather than a ranking.

Evidence of patriarchy at each level

Use the four levels from "Key ideas" to organise your evidence.

- **Word.** God is usually imagined and addressed as male (Father, Lord, King). In many traditions the sacred texts were written for men and describe women mainly as wives, mothers or temptresses. Catholic teaching since *Humanae Vitae* (1968) has opposed artificial contraception, which affects women's control

of their own bodies most.

- **Office.** The Catholic and Orthodox churches ordain only men as priests. Orthodox Judaism has male rabbis. Most mosques have male imams, and women rarely lead mixed congregations. Even in churches that ordain women, Sullins's **stained-glass ceiling** applies: women are over-represented among unpaid, part-time and assistant clergy and under-represented in the top posts.
- **Rite and space.** Orthodox synagogues seat women behind a screen (*mechitza*) or in a gallery; many mosques have a smaller women's room or gallery, or none. Women may be barred from handling sacred objects, reading in public or entering shrines during menstruation.
- **Life.** Many faiths teach that men lead the household. Religious leaders have campaigned against legal abortion, easier divorce and same-sex marriage. In Afghanistan the Taliban government, claiming religious authority, has barred girls from secondary school since **2021**. Forced marriages and so-called "honour" violence are sometimes justified in religious terms (though religious leaders usually condemn them).
- **Who gains?** For questions that ask whether religion serves **men**, spell out the gains: authority and respect in the community; control over women's sexuality and marriage; women's unpaid work in the home and in running the congregation; and status that can be turned into influence elsewhere (an elder or cleric may be listened to by politicians, employers and courts).
- **Women's own testimony.** Women who leave strict groups often describe guilt about their bodies, fear of male authority and a narrow sense of what they were allowed to become. This is the evidence interactionists ask for, and it can support the feminist case.

Moves towards gender equality

Change has been real in many organisations, especially in the West since the 1970s:

- **Church of England.** The General Synod voted to ordain women priests in **1992**, and the first were ordained in **1994**. After a long struggle, women bishops were approved in **2014**; Libby Lane became the first in **2015**. In **2025** Sarah Mullally was named the first woman Archbishop of Canterbury.
- **Judaism.** Regina Jonas was ordained a rabbi in Germany in **1935**; Reform Judaism in the USA ordained Sally Priesand in **1972**. Reform and Liberal synagogues now have many women rabbis and mixed seating.
- **Islam.** Women-led mosques have opened, such as the Mariam Mosque in Copenhagen (**2016**), with women imams. Muslim feminist scholars reread the Qur'an and the record of the Prophet's wives to argue for equality.
- **Catholic Church.** The priesthood stays male, but in **2021** the Pope opened the formal roles of reader and altar server to women, and women have been appointed to senior posts in the Vatican.
- **Faiths with older traditions of equality.** **Quakers** have let women preach since the 1650s and have no separate clergy. **Sikhism** teaches the equality of all people (Guru Nanak); any Sikh, woman or man, may lead prayers or read from the Guru Granth Sahib.
- **Newer movements.** Many New Age and holistic groups have no fixed hierarchy and are run largely by women; in Heelas and Woodhead's Kendal study about **80%** of those active were women. Wicca and goddess spirituality put a female divine at the centre.

Why change happens:

- **Feminism and the law.** Equality laws and changing values outside religion put pressure on religious bodies to justify men-only roles.
- **Keeping members.** **Callum Brown** (*The Death of Christian Britain*, **2001**) argued that churches in Britain declined fast from the 1960s **because** women, the backbone of congregations, left as their lives and expectations changed. A church that excludes women from leadership risks losing the people who fill its pews.
- **Shortage of clergy.** Falling numbers of male candidates made women's ministry a practical need in some denominations.
- **Pressure from inside.** Women's groups, religious feminists and sympathetic men campaign within the organisations.

Why change may be shallow or reversed:

- **Uneven change.** The largest Christian church, Catholicism, and Orthodox Christianity and Judaism have not opened their priesthood or rabbinate to women.
- **Opt-outs.** In the Church of England, parishes that reject women's ministry can ask for a male priest or bishop.
- **Tokenism.** A few women in visible posts can make an organisation look equal while real power (money, doctrine, appointments) stays with men; the stained-glass ceiling suggests this.
- **Backlash.** **Steve Bruce** sees fundamentalism partly as **cultural defence** against modern change, including change in women's roles. Fundamentalist movements in Christianity, Islam, Judaism and Hinduism often make control of women's dress, sexuality and education a central cause.

Evidence that religion can benefit women

This is the strongest challenge to the radical feminist view: women are not just victims of religion; many use it.

- **Linda Woodhead (2002)** argued that women often find in religion respect, community and a space of their own. She described **religious forms of feminism**: women using the resources of a faith to improve their position within it.
- **Helen Watson (1994)** interviewed Muslim women in Britain who chose to wear the veil. For some it was a statement of identity, a protection from being judged by their looks, and a way to move freely in public while showing their faith.
- **Elizabeth Brusco** (*The Reformation of Machismo*, **1995**) studied Pentecostal converts in Colombia. The new faith told men to give up heavy drinking, gambling and affairs and to put their wages into the family. Women did not gain formal office, but their households gained money, safety and respect.
- **Saba Mahmood** (*Politics of Piety*, **2005**) studied women's mosque groups in Cairo who met to study and teach Islam. They were not seeking Western-style equality, but they gained knowledge, authority over other women and a public role.
- **Susan Sered** (*Priestess, Mother, Sacred Sister*, **1994**) studied religions led mainly by women, from Afro-Brazilian faiths to the Shakers and Christian Science. They tended to focus on healing, the home and everyday problems, which shows that religion does not have to be male-led.

- **Informal power.** Even in male-led faiths, women often run religious life in the home (teaching prayers, keeping festivals and food rules), organise charity and community work, and keep congregations going.
- **The holistic milieu.** New Age spirituality puts the self, feelings and healing at the centre, and gives women leadership as teachers and therapists (Heelas and Woodhead).

The feminist reply. Gains inside a male-run system may be the "compensation" de Beauvoir described; women who choose a practice may have been socialised to choose it; and benefits to some women (often middle-class, Western, or converts by choice) say little about women with no exit.

Different theories, different verdicts

Theory	Verdict on religion and gender	Main weakness to use in evaluation
Radical feminism (Daly)	patriarchal at its core; women should leave	ignores women's own reasons for staying and change inside faiths
Liberal feminism	unequal, but reformable; progress is under way	may mistake a few women leaders for equality (tokenism)
Marxist feminism	serves capitalism and men together	reduces religion to economics; offers few studies of believers
Feminists from within a faith (El Saadawi, Mernissi, Ruether)	the faith is not the problem; male interpretations are	hard to prove what the "original" faith meant
Functionalism	men and women have complementary roles that keep family and society stable	treats inequality as harmless difference; dated view of family life
Interactionism	ask believers what taking part means to them; outsiders cannot decide it for them	women's views may be shaped by the very socialisation in question
Postmodernism	many women now build their own spirituality outside male-run churches	the holistic milieu is small and mostly middle-class

Two cross-cutting points that lift an essay.

- **Cause or reflection?** If religion only **reflects** patriarchy in wider society, the quotation's claim about religion is weaker: secular institutions (work, politics, media) carry the same inequality. If religion **sacralises** it, religion adds something that is harder to challenge.
- **Intersection.** Gender works together with class, ethnicity, age and nationality. A young, educated, British Muslim woman choosing the hijab and a girl in a village denied schooling are both "women in religion", but their experiences are very different. **Secularisation** matters here as well: a church that most people never attend cannot shape many women's lives, whatever it teaches.

Key facts and formulas

There is no formula list in Sociology. "Learn it" means you must remember it.

Key term	Status
Patriarchy; the four levels of gender inequality in religion: word, office, rite and space, life	Learn it
Ordination; feminisation of religion; stained-glass ceiling (Sullins, 2000); religious feminism; inclusive language	Learn it
Feminist perspectives: compensation (de Beauvoir, 1949); radical feminism, "if God is male, then the male is God" (Daly, 1973); Marxist feminism; liberal feminism; feminist theology (Ruether, 1983; Mernissi; Wadud)	Learn it
Explanations: goddess religion pushed aside by monotheism (Armstrong, 1993); patriarchal interpretation, not the faith itself (El Saadawi, 1980); purity and pollution (Holm, 1994); organisation and tradition; religion reflecting wider patriarchy	Learn it
Change: Church of England women priests 1994, women bishops 2015; women rabbis (Jonas 1935, Priesand 1972); women-led mosques; Quakers and Sikhism; women-led NRMs and the holistic milieu (about 80% women)	Learn it
Limits to change: tokenism; opt-outs; fundamentalism as cultural defence (Bruce); Catholic and Orthodox male priesthood	Learn it
Benefits: religious forms of feminism (Woodhead, 2002); the veil (Watson, 1994); reformation of machismo (Brusco, 1995); women's mosque movement (Mahmood, 2005); women-led religions (Sered, 1994); women leaving and church decline (Brown, 2001)	Learn it
Paper 4: two essays from different sections, each 35 marks: AO1 9, AO2 11, AO3 15, so $9 + 11 + 15 = 35$	Learn it

How to do it

We have tagged 13 questions for this topic (2021–2026). Three were set in two papers of the same session, so there are 10 different questions. All are 35-mark "Evaluate this view" essays from Paper 4, and none mixes types, so the counts add up to 13.

Question type	Questions
Evaluate whether religion is patriarchal and works against women	8
Evaluate how much power or equality women have in religious organisations	4
Evaluate whether religion has become less patriarchal	1

Paper 4 lasts 1 hour 45 minutes for two essays, so allow about 50 minutes for each, including 5 minutes to plan.

Before every plan, answer three questions in the margin:

1. **Which level?** Is the quotation about religion in general (beliefs and values: the **word** level), about **organisations** (the **office** and **rite** levels), or about women's lives as a whole (**life**)? Lead with evidence from the level it names.
2. **How strong is the claim?** "All", "no power", "complete equality" and "serves men rather than women" are extreme: one clear exception damages them. "Little power" and "contributes to" are milder and need a judgement of **how much**.
3. **Which direction?** "Women are oppressed" agrees with radical feminism; "complete equality" and "less patriarchal" agree with its critics. Build the first half to support the view as worded.

1. Evaluate whether religion is patriarchal and works against women (8 questions)

Asked as: religion serves the interests of men rather than women (1); religion supports patriarchal values (2, the same question in two papers); religious organisations are patriarchal (1); religion contributes to gender inequality (1); women are oppressed by religion (2, the same question in two papers); all religions are patriarchal and contribute to gender inequality (1).

1. **Introduction.** Define patriarchy and the quotation's key word (oppression, gender inequality, "serves the interests of"). Say that this is the feminist case and that you will test it level by level and religion by religion.
2. **Build the feminist case, one level at a time** (a paragraph each, every one with a named example):
 - **Word:** male images of God (Daly); the Genesis story and New Testament letters used to justify obedience; teaching on contraception (*Humanae Vitae*);
 - **Office:** male priesthood and rabbinate; male imams; the stained-glass ceiling where women can be ordained;
 - **Rite and space:** screens, galleries and separate rooms; purity rules on menstruation and childbirth (Holm); the Sabarimala case;
 - **Life:** teaching that men head the household; campaigns against abortion and divorce; girls' schooling in Afghanistan; marriage pressures justified by religion.
3. **Explain it with theory:** de Beauvoir's compensation; Daly's radical feminism; the Marxist feminist link to unpaid domestic work; El Saadawi and Armstrong on how faiths became patriarchal. For "serves men", list **what men gain** (authority, control of marriage and sexuality, women's unpaid work, status that carries into politics and employment).
4. **Test the claim four ways** (this is your AO3):
 - **Which religion?** Quakers, Sikhism, Reform Judaism, women-led faiths (Sered), Wicca and goddess religion, the holistic milieu: the claim does not fit them all, so "all religions" fails;
 - **When?** women priests and bishops in the Church of England, women rabbis, women-led mosques, Catholic changes in 2021; but weigh tokenism and the fundamentalist backlash;
 - **Whose view?** Watson's veiled women, Mahmood's mosque groups, Brusco's Colombian wives, Woodhead's religious feminism; women form the majority of worshippers in many faiths and choose to stay;
 - **Which theory?** functionalists see complementary roles; interactionists ask for women's own accounts; much feminist writing is theory with little fieldwork and draws mainly on Western Christianity.

5. **Cause or reflection?** Argue whether religion **creates** gender inequality or **carries** the patriarchy of the society around it (El Saadawi; the same faith differs between countries). Add the secularisation point: in societies where few people practise, religious rules reach fewer women, so religion's share in their inequality is small next to work, the family and the media.
6. **Conclusion**, for example: religion has supported patriarchy in its texts, leadership and teaching on family life, and men have gained from this; but the degree varies widely between faiths and is falling in many, and women are not passive victims, so religion often **reflects and reinforces** patriarchy rather than being its single cause.

Variants.

- **"Serves the interests of men rather than women"**: the words "rather than" need both halves tested. Show what men gain, then show what women gain too (Brusco, Woodhead, Watson, Mahmood), and judge whether the balance favours men.
- **"Religious organisations are patriarchal"**: stay mostly with **office** and **rite and space**; use the word and life levels as support.
- **"All religions"**: you must cover several religions and at least one counter-case (Quakers, Sikhism, women-led faiths) in detail.
- **"Contributes to gender inequality"**: focus on the link from religion to inequality **outside** the place of worship (home, work, law); the examiners report that essays on gender inequality in general, with religion barely mentioned, score low.

2. Evaluate how much power or equality women have in religious organisations (4 questions)

Asked as: women have complete equality with men in religious organisations today (1); women have no power within religious organisations (2, the same question in two papers); women have little power within religious organisations (1).

The key move is to **split "power"** into three kinds, so that you can agree and disagree at once:

Kind of power	Where women lack it	Where women have it
Formal authority : office, doctrine, appointments, money	Catholic and Orthodox priesthood; Orthodox rabbis; most imams; top posts even where ordination is open (stained-glass ceiling)	Church of England bishops and, from 2025, an archbishop; women rabbis; women imams in women-led mosques; Quaker meetings
Informal influence : running congregations, teaching children, charity	rarely recognised or paid	women organise most volunteering, keep religious practice going in the home, and pass the faith to children
Spiritual and personal authority : leading worship, healing, their own groups	barred from sacred spaces or rites in some faiths	women-led faiths (Sered); the holistic milieu (Heelas and Woodhead); women's study groups (Mahmood)

1. **Introduction.** Define power (the ability to make decisions and shape others' actions) and equality (the same access to every role, rank and voice). Note the strength of the quotation: "no" and "complete" are absolute; "little" asks how much.
2. **The case for the quotation** (if it says women lack power): evidence at the **office** level first, then **rite and space** (exclusion from sacred places and tasks), then the **word** level (teachings that legitimise male authority); feminist theory to explain it (Daly, de Beauvoir, El Saadawi, Holm).
3. **The case against:** the change since the 1970s (Church of England timeline, Judaism, Islam, Catholic changes); faiths with long traditions of equality (Quakers, Sikhism); informal and spiritual power from the table; women's own reasons for taking part (Woodhead, Watson, Mahmood, Brusco).
4. **Evaluate:** tokenism and the stained-glass ceiling (is a woman bishop evidence of equal power or of a token?); opt-outs and backlash (fundamentalism); differences between and within faiths; whether informal influence counts as real power (feminists say it keeps women in the roles men assign); functionalist and interactionist views.
5. **Conclusion**, for example: women's formal power has grown in some organisations but remains limited or absent in the largest ones, while informal and spiritual power is wider than the quotation allows; "no power" is false, "complete equality" is false, and "little power" is closest to true for formal authority.

Variants.

- **"Complete equality ... today":** the quotation is **against** the feminist view. Lead with the change and the equal faiths; then use the persisting inequality as evaluation. Note that even the most changed organisations still have opt-outs, gaps at the top or arguments over doctrine, so "complete" is very hard to defend.
- **"No power":** one clear example of power held by women defeats "no"; the essay then becomes a judgement of **how much** and **what kind**.

3. Evaluate whether religion has become less patriarchal (1 question)

Asked as: religion has become less patriarchal (1).

This question is about **change over time**. According to the examiners, weaker answers set out feminist ideas and then stop, never comparing the past with the present.

1. **Introduction.** Define patriarchy; say what "less" needs: a comparison between then and now, level by level.
2. **Then.** Summarise the feminist picture of traditional religion (the four levels; de Beauvoir, Daly, Holm), dating it where you can.
3. **What has changed, and why:**
 - **office:** women priests, bishops and an archbishop in the Church of England; women rabbis; women imams; new Catholic roles;
 - **word:** inclusive language; feminist theology and new readings of scripture (Ruether, Mernissi, Wadud);
 - **life:** religions have lost much of their hold over law on divorce, contraception and abortion in many countries (secularisation);

- **new forms:** the holistic milieu and women-led NRMs;
 - **causes:** feminism and equality law; the need to keep women members (Brown); clergy shortages.
4. **What has not changed:** the Catholic and Orthodox priesthood; Orthodox Judaism; the stained-glass ceiling and tokenism; opt-outs; fundamentalist backlash that tightens control of women (Bruce's cultural defence; Afghanistan).
5. **Evaluate:** the change is concentrated in Western, liberal Protestant and Jewish bodies; the faiths with the most members have changed least; and some women never saw their faith as patriarchal in the first place (Watson, Mahmood).
6. **Conclusion**, for example: religion has become less patriarchal in many Western organisations and in women's freedom to choose new forms, but not across the world's largest faiths, and in some places it has become more restrictive.

Worked examples

Each is a new 35-mark essay on a part of the syllabus that has not yet had its own question. Marks are given the way the levels mark scheme works: by assessment objective and level, not by points. In the exam, write each bullet as a full paragraph.

Example 1

'Religious practices bring more benefits than costs to women.' Evaluate this view. [35]

Introduction. Define religious practices (worship, ritual, dress, food rules, family customs) and say that "benefits" and "costs" must be weighed for different women in different faiths.

For the view (AO1/AO2).

- **Respect and safety in the home:** Brusco's Colombian Pentecostals; men's behaviour reformed by the faith, so wives gain money and security.
- **Identity and freedom of movement:** Watson's veiled women chose the veil to show their faith and avoid being judged by their looks.
- **Knowledge and authority:** Mahmood's mosque study groups gave women expertise and influence over other women.
- **Community and meaning:** Woodhead's religious feminism; women's networks, charity and support in times of illness, birth and death.
- **Spiritual leadership:** women-led faiths (Sered) and the holistic milieu (about 80% women).

Against the view (AO3).

- **Compensation:** de Beauvoir would call these gains a consolation for lower status.
- **Costs at every level:** male-only office, purity rules (Holm), teaching against contraception, pressure over marriage, limits on girls' schooling.

- **Choice and socialisation:** a woman socialised from birth into a faith may "choose" what she was taught to want; interactionist evidence needs care.
- **Which women?** Benefits found among converts or middle-class women in the West say little about women who cannot leave.
- **Who designs the practices?** Even where women gain, men usually set the rules (radical feminism).

Conclusion. Many women gain real benefits, especially where they chose the faith or the practice; but the costs fall hardest on women with least choice, so the balance depends on the faith, the country and the woman's freedom to leave.

How it would be marked. Accurate use of Brusco, Watson, Mahmood, Woodhead, de Beauvoir and Holm (AO1 7–9), every point applied to **weighing benefits against costs for women** (AO2 10–11), and sustained evaluation that asks which women and which practices before reaching a judgement (AO3 12–15).

Example 2

'Gender inequality in religion simply mirrors the patriarchy of the society around it.' Evaluate this view. [35]

Introduction. Set out the two possible directions: religion **causes** inequality (radical feminism) or **reflects** the society it grew up in.

For the view (AO1/AO2).

- **El Saadawi:** oppression comes from patriarchal customs and male interpretations, not from Islam itself.
- **Armstrong:** goddess religions existed; monotheism became male as societies did.
- **Variation:** the same faith treats women differently in different countries, which points to society, not belief, as the cause.
- **Change follows society:** Church of England women priests and bishops came after equality laws and the women's movement (Brown on women leaving the churches).

Against the view (AO3).

- **Belief does the work:** Daly; male images of God and sacred texts make inequality look divine and so harder to change than secular inequality.
- **Religion shapes society too:** religious teaching on contraception, abortion and divorce has shaped laws that affect all women.
- **Resistance to change:** the Catholic and Orthodox priesthood stays male in societies with equality laws, defended on grounds of tradition, which is a religious reason.
- **Fundamentalism:** Bruce's cultural defence shows religion actively pushing back against wider change.
- **A two-way relationship:** Weber's view that ideas and society influence each other suits the evidence better than either one-way claim.

Conclusion. Patriarchal religion was born in patriarchal societies, so the view has strong historical support; but once in place, religious belief adds a sacred authority that keeps inequality going after society changes, so the relationship runs both ways.

How it would be marked. Accurate use of El Saadawi, Armstrong, Daly, Bruce and the examples of change (AO1 7–9), consistently applied to the **cause versus reflection** question (AO2 10–11), and sustained evaluation that weighs evidence for each direction before reaching a judgement (AO3 12–15).

Example 3

'Feminist theories exaggerate the patriarchal nature of religion.' Evaluate this view. [35]

Introduction. Outline the main feminist theories (de Beauvoir, radical, Marxist, liberal, feminists within faiths); note that "exaggerate" is a claim about theory, so the essay must judge the theories against evidence.

For the view (AO1/AO2).

- **Women's agency is ignored:** Woodhead, Watson, Mahmood and Brusco show women using religion for their own ends.
- **Not all religions fit:** Quakers, Sikhism, women-led faiths (Sered), the holistic milieu.
- **Change since the theories were written:** Daly wrote in 1973, before women priests and bishops in the Church of England or women-led mosques.
- **Thin and Western evidence:** much feminist theory rests on texts and Western Christianity rather than fieldwork among believers.
- **Rival views:** functionalist complementary roles; interactionist stress on women's meanings.

Against the view (AO3).

- **The evidence at every level:** male leadership in the largest faiths, purity rules, teaching on women's bodies.
- **Change is partial:** tokenism and the stained-glass ceiling; opt-outs.
- **Backlash:** fundamentalist control of women's dress, sexuality and schooling.
- **Feminists differ:** liberal feminists and feminists within faiths already accept that religion can change, so "feminist theories" are not one exaggerated view.

Conclusion. Radical feminism overstates the case by treating all religion as fixed and all women as victims; liberal and within-faith feminism describes the evidence better; the theories exaggerate less for the largest, most traditional faiths than for liberal Western ones.

How it would be marked. Accurate knowledge of the range of feminist theories and the evidence (AO1 7–9), applied throughout to whether the theories **overstate** patriarchy (AO2 10–11), and sustained evaluation that separates different feminisms and different faiths before reaching a judgement (AO3 12–15).

Common mistakes

- **Writing about inequality between the sexes with religion left out.** The examiners report essays that discuss the family, work or the media with religion barely mentioned. Every paragraph needs a religious example.

- **One-sided essays.** Plenty of essays make the feminist case well and then stop, which keeps them out of the top bands for AO3. Plan the "against" side before you start writing.
- **Describing roles without explaining them.** Saying that women sit in a gallery or cannot be priests is description. Explain **why** (purity, tradition, ideology, organisation) and **what it does** (who gains, who loses).
- **Assertion instead of evidence.** "Religion keeps women down" needs a theorist, a study or a named example: Daly, Holm, the Church of England timeline, Watson.
- **Treating all religions as one.** Strong answers compare faiths (Catholicism with Quakers, Orthodox with Reform Judaism) and countries.
- **Ignoring time.** Whenever the quotation says "today" or "become", compare then and now, and ask whether the change is real or token.
- **Forgetting women's own views.** The strongest evaluation uses women's accounts of why they take part, not only theories written about them.

How to get the marks

- **"Evaluate this view" (35 marks):** one essay, marked by levels for each assessment objective.
- **AO1 knowledge and understanding (9):** the top level (7–9) needs many detailed points with concepts, theory and evidence. Name theorists (de Beauvoir, Daly, El Saadawi, Armstrong, Holm, Woodhead, Watson, Brusco, Sered, Sullins) and use the concepts (patriarchy, ordination, stained-glass ceiling, tokenism, religious feminism, cultural defence).
- **AO2 interpretation and application (11):** the top level (10–11) needs material **consistently applied to the question**. If it says "organisations", focus on leadership and worship; if it says "power", say which kind of power each piece of evidence shows.
- **AO3 analysis and evaluation (15):** the top level (12–15) needs evaluation that is **explicit, detailed and sustained**, with contrasting views and evidence. Simply describing the other side, with only an implied link to the quotation, stays in the 4–7 band; explicit evaluation that is not kept up reaches 8–11.
- **Evaluation moves that work in every type:** which level of religion (word, office, rite and space, life); which religion and which country; then and now; whose view (women's own accounts or theorists'); which theory; and cause or reflection.
- **Reach a judgement** that answers the exact wording: how far, in which faiths, for which women.
- **Answer two questions from different sections;** the paper is out of $2 \times 35 = 70$.

Quick check

1. Give one sentence each on how radical, liberal and Marxist feminists see religion.
2. What did Nawal El Saadawi argue was the source of women's oppression in Muslim societies, and why does this weaken the claim that religion itself serves men?
3. Give two pieces of evidence that change in the Church of England is real, and one reason it might be called tokenism.

4. An essay reaches the top level for AO1 and AO2 but only Level 3 for AO3 (8–11). What are the highest and lowest total marks it could get?
5. Explain how Brusco's study of Colombian Pentecostals suggests religion can benefit women, and give one feminist reply.

Answers

1. **Radical:** religion is a core source of patriarchy that makes male power look divine, so women should reject it (Daly). **Liberal:** religion is unequal but can be reformed through ordination, inclusive language and equal leadership. **Marxist:** religion's teaching on women's domestic role serves both men and capitalism by providing unpaid care work.
2. She argued that oppression comes from **patriarchal interpretations** of Islam by men and from older patriarchal customs, not from the faith itself. If so, the inequality belongs to society and its male scholars, and the same faith could be read in an equal way, so religion as such is not the cause.
3. **Real:** women priests since 1994; women bishops since 2015 (Libby Lane); Sarah Mullally named Archbishop of Canterbury in 2025. **Tokenism:** Sullins's stained-glass ceiling (women concentrated in junior, part-time or unpaid posts), or opt-outs for parishes that reject women's ministry.
4. Highest: $9 + 11 + 11 = 31$. Lowest: $7 + 10 + 8 = 25$.
5. The faith required men to give up drinking, gambling and affairs and to spend their wages on the family, so wives gained money, safety and respect at home. A feminist reply: the women still had no formal leadership, so the gains came **within** a male-run system, a kind of compensation (de Beauvoir).

Past questions to try

- [9699/42/F/M/22 Q5](#): essay on whether religion contributes to gender inequality.
- [9699/42/O/N/22 Q6](#): essay on whether religion has become less patriarchal.
- [9699/41/M/J/23 Q6](#): essay on whether women have little power within religious organisations.
- [9699/41/M/J/21 Q6](#): essay on whether all religions are patriarchal and contribute to gender inequality.