

## Christianity, Women's Rights and Feminist Ethics

In an interview with Prof. Cristina Traina



Conducted By: Dr. Sabah Mofidi

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Cristina L. H. Traina is professor and Chair of the Department of Religious Studies, Northwestern University, US. Her studies and works are related to ethics especially Christian and Feminist ethics, bioethics, justice, sexuality, economic rights, and method. She has published many books and articles. Her two books are *Feminist Ethics and Natural Law: The End of the Anathemas* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1999) and *Erotic Attunement: Parenthood and the Ethics of Sensuality between Unequals* (University of Chicago Press, 2011).

**KCCRC:** Muslims believe the books and beliefs of other divine religions before Islam were changed and distorted. What is your opinion about the changes in the sacred texts and beliefs of Christians during history?

**Prof. Cristina:** Christians hold a variety of beliefs about the Bible. Some hold that God dictated the words of scripture directly to various human prophets and apostles. However, it's more common to believe that God inspired the authors of the various books to write in the language and symbolism of their own cultures. In addition, the Bible was redacted: collected and edited after a long process involving decisions about which texts would be canonical, or authoritative, and which texts were important, but less central. No original manuscripts exist, and in any case no one would have thought those original manuscripts were permanent, authoritative texts when they were written down. They became authoritative in the process of being used by Christian communities. So most Christians do not view the fact that manuscripts differ as a problem or a distortion. Rather, they see this variety as exciting evidence of the ways in which texts and ideas were copied and traveled from the Ancient Near East to other regions.

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<sup>1</sup> The interview was published at first in Kurdish on the website of the Kurdistan Conflict and Crisis Center (KCCRC). To see its Kurdish version, see: <http://www.kurdistanc.com/islamic/details.aspx?jimare=5469>

**KCCRC:** Contrary to the other religions, in the Islamic world there is a Qur'an text with different interpretations. Could you please explain the effect of different sacred texts on the socio-political conflicts between the different sects of Christianity?

**Prof. Cristina:** This question is closely related to the previous one. Christian scripture is composed of the Hebrew Bible (or Old Testament), inherited from Judaism, and the New Testament, generated after Jesus Christ. In different places and times, different groups of Christians have placed more emphasis on certain books of the Bible and deemphasized others. For example, Reformation Protestants relied very heavily on the letters of Paul, while Roman Catholics of the same era often emphasized the Gospel of Matthew, Hebrew Bible legal texts, and the official, developed teachings of the Roman Catholic Church. These days, some Christians place more emphasis on the Gospel of Luke, which stresses alleviation of poverty and illness, and others place more emphasis on the Gospel of John, which stresses the distinctions between Christians and other religious groups. Over the last 5 centuries, when doctrine was often the central point of controversy, these differences of emphasis have been significant points of conflict.

**KCCRC:** How have the effects of Christianity on the role of women been in society? In your opinion, what is the difference between the effect of Islam and Christianity on the women's rights?

**Prof. Cristina:** Both Christianity and Islam are extremely diverse traditions that have also absorbed the practices of their surrounding cultures. This makes a short answer impossible. However, there is strong textual and doctrinal support in both Christianity and Islam for the equal dignity of women and men, and therefore for women's political rights. Similarly, in different times and places branches of both traditions have embraced other religious beliefs and practices that have limited women's rights.

**KCCRC:** How do you see the role of religion on the advent of feminist movement? Could you please explain the impact of Christian ethics on feminist ethics?

**Prof. Cristina:** This is a good question, as it's often assumed the Christianity was historically opposed to feminism. But in fact Christian beliefs about human equality before God were foundational for Western feminism. Saint Paul's insistence that there is neither male nor female in Christ (Galatians 3:28) is a key passage. Christian beliefs about the importance of women's work in the household were also central to first-wave Western feminism, including the temperance and birth control movements. As a Christian feminist ethicist, I see the central commitments of Christianity and feminism as compatible rather than opposed. That said, for

important reasons some feminist ethicists are quite skeptical of Christianity and prefer not to discuss Christianity's influence on feminist ethics.

**KCCRC:** As the author of *Feminist Ethics and Natural Law*, could you please throw more light about the relationship between law, religion and ethics?

**Prof. Cristina:** Law, religion, and ethics relate differently in every religious tradition. Islam and Roman Catholicism are similar in two ways. First, both traditions see a significant portion of our religious law as moral law. Second, we see moral law as both deeply rooted in tradition and as responding dynamically to historical change, though ongoing deliberation in the light of texts, precedents, new scientific discoveries, etc. As a result, our traditions both contribute something essential to contemporary political discussions of law: the idea that law protects robust community and individual goods. At the same time, both of our traditions need to be careful not to sacrifice the spirit of an old law to the letter of that same law.

**KCCRC:** You have a good experience in religious studies. In this regard, what are your recommendations and advices for the research and academic centers of Kurdistan?

**Prof. Cristina:** Religious people often worry that religious studies approaches will weaken religious commitment. However, religious studies bring the tools of all disciplines to bear on religious traditions in ways that can deepen our appreciation for our own beliefs and practices. Literary analysis helps us understand both the aesthetics and the deeper assumptions and commitments of religious texts. Sociology and psychology help us comprehend the many layers of significance of the rituals we practice. History helps us to appreciate how religious traditions change to meet the challenges posed by changes in culture—and how culture has been shaped by religion in ways that may be almost invisible to us now. Philosophy helps us understand how theology—the language of religious belief—is shaped by our worldviews. Race, gender, and colonial analyses enrich our understandings of the ways in which religion and power intersect at the political and individual scale. Exploring all these questions, and others, will yield a dynamic, relevant program.