



Sacred Patriarchy and Spatial Discipline in Holy Women: A Foucauldian Feminist Analysis

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Abstract

This study investigates sacred patriarchy as a disciplinary formation that regulates the bodies, spaces and subjectivities of holy women of various Catholic, Protestant and Islamic traditions. The study is rooted in the historical and ongoing marginalization of women in institutionalized religion and focuses on a gap in cross-traditional feminist religious studies. The theoretical framework theories and retheorises the concepts of Michel Foucault on disciplinary power, the panopticon, docile bodies and technologies of the self, feminist theological critique, spatial theory, and intersectional feminist analysis. The study uses qualitative approach with the main analytical tool being Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA) and feminist textual and visual discourse analysis. The primary texts (15 religious and institutional, 10 policy and regulatory, and 12 representational) were purposively selected using maximum variation sampling, across three traditions, three geographic regions, and three historical periods, and yielded data. The results show that sacred space is a unified panoptic instrument of patriarchal oppression; holy femininity is a discursive construction historically produced with the purpose of naturalizing gender hierarchy through its practice of obedience, silence, and self-abnegation; and the holy women are strategically compliant, yet still exhibit stubborn tactical agency through their own practice of mystical counter-discourse and collective institutional resistance. The study makes a theoretical, methodological, and empirical addition to feminist religions studies.

Keywords: Sacred Patriarchy, Spatial Discipline, Foucauldian Discourse Analysis, Holy Women, Disciplinary Power, Feminist Theology, Docile Body, Religious Agency, Discursive Normalization, Intersectional Feminism

Introduction

One of the most persistent and controversial areas in feminist research is the nexus of religion and gender and power. Religious sites, from culture to period, have not just been places for the performance of religion, but have been comprehensive institutions of normative control: institutions that construct circumscribe and create the gendered subject. Women who commit to a religious vocation are in a unique and charged position in this set of interwoven spaces, they are revered and also expected to be subject to complex regimes of surveillance, discipline and containment. The term “holy woman” is not an objective term, but rather a socially constructed

category that is maintained by patriarchal power and a range of disciplinary technologies that extend beyond the bounds of doctrine (Butler, 1990; Mahmood, 2005). This theoretical framework of Michel Foucault's on the concepts of power and disciplinary society allows for a generative discussion of how religious institutions organize and regulate the female body. In *Discipline and Punish* (1977) and the *History of Sexuality* (1978), Foucault showed that the power of the modern world is not so much a matter of brute force as of the careful management of space and time and manners (what he called "disciplinary power"). Together, the convent, the cloister, the prayer schedule, the dress code, and the confessional create Foucault's "total institution": a place where all aspects of life are made visible, hierarchized, and normalized (Foucault, 1977; Goffman, 1961). A feminist analysis makes this even more revealing, since it reveals that sacred spaces have historically been fashioned as technologies of gender management, which use the discourse of divine mandate to mask the exercise of patriarchy (Daly, 1973; Ruether, 1983). Religious women are no exception, as feminist scholars have challenged the extent to which women have agency in these disciplines. By examining the position of pious women in the Egyptian mosque movement, Saba Mahmood's (2005) ethnography of the movement presents a challenge to the liberal feminist assumptions that Islamic expressions of piety are confined to women's "private sphere" or are reliant on men's "public sphere. Saba Mahmood's (2005) ethnography of the Egyptian mosque movement counters liberal feminist premises of a "private sphere" of women's or a "public sphere" of men's piety by showing that pious women can inhabit the "normative" language of their religion as active ethical subjects rather than passive victims of other's patriarchal ideology. But, as McNay (1992) warned, the danger of romanticizing such agency is very real, especially given that the very structures in which women operate are constructed through relations of domination. There is a tension between discipline and devotion, constraint and calling in the literature, and this tension must be continually explored (McNay 1992; Isherwood & McPhillips 2008). This dynamic is complicated by the cultural portrayal of holy women, as seen in literature, film, hagiography and visual art. Representations are not just an expression of that reality but are also a part of the production and reproduction of normative femininity related to specific religious ideals (de Beauvoir 1949; Irigaray 1985). The image of the saintly woman, chaste, obedient, self-abnegating, spatially contained, serves as a regulatory ideal that disciplines women not only as members of a formal religious community, but also larger female subjectivities in the surrounding culture. This is an extension of Foucault's (1980) concept of "power/knowledge": the ability of dominant discourses to construct "truths" that normalise a certain subject position and make other positions deviant or "invisible". This convergence between theories is addressed in the present study by examining the construction of holy femininity and its disciplinary aspects. It builds on Foucauldian concepts of the panopticon, the docile body, bio-power, and technologies of the self, as well as feminist theological and gender theory approaches, and looks at how sacred patriarchy is manifested through space, the body, and the normalizing of discourse (Foucault, 1977, 1988; Bordo, 1993). This analysis is placed in the context of feminist critique of religious patriarchy (Ruether, 1983; Schüssler Fiorenza, 1994), to shed light on the power mechanisms that produce and limit the lives of holy women, as well as on the spaces of resistance and self-fashioning that holy women have historically created.

Research Questions

1. What do the spatial and disciplinary organization of religious institutions have to do with the control of women's holiness?
2. What do the discourses of religion do in terms of gendered hierarchies and what is the ideal of holy womanhood?
3. How much agency have holy women in disciplining sacred patriarchy?

Research Objectives

1. To explore and analyse how spatial and bodily disciplinary practices are enacted in religious institutions using Foucauldian theory and feminist critique, and to pinpoint the inscription of sacred patriarchal power within and on the body of religious women.
2. To examine the discursive creation of holy femininity in religious texts and images, looking at how these constructions are discursively normalizing hierarchies of gender while also creating sites of tension and resistance.
3. To examine the scope of agency and self-fashioning afforded to holy women by patriarchal religious practices, and to evaluate the circumstances in which disciplinary subjectification can be a tool for ethical self-constitution.

Significance of the Study

This study is timely and necessary for engaging Foucauldian and feminist theories with the under-researched issue of gender, sanctity and spatial discipline. It contributes to feminist religious scholarship by offering a complex and dynamic understanding of the dynamics of sacred power, power exercised by men over women, that neither ignores the importance of religious women as victims nor accepts power exercised over religious women as fully legitimate.

Literature Review

The ideas of Michel Foucault about disciplinary power continue to be fundamental to the study of institutions' control over bodies and subjectivities. Foucault (1977) claimed that bodies in modern institutions of all kinds prisons, schools, hospitals, and monasteries were not just immobilized by these institutions but also “dociled,” rendered useful and compliant. Foucault's central metaphor, the panopticon, refers to a system of surveillance which renders self-regulation necessary even without being enforced by others, because one can only be self-regulated if one is in the potential presence of an all-seeing eye. This has been fruitfully applied to the arenas of religious institutions, in which scholars have posited the idea of a disciplinary space that imposes normative identities on those who occupy it through the establishment of routine, ritual, and spatial enclosure (Lester, 2005; Mahmood, 2005). This argument has been developed in more recent scholarship, where it has been shown that disciplinary power within religious frameworks is not imposed from above but is internalized and reproduced through embodied practice, collective liturgy and the architecture of sacred space (Orsi, 2016; Taves, 2020). The patriarchal nature of dominant world religions has been well documented by feminist theological scholarship. One of the earliest and most influential systemic critiques was offered by Ruether (1983), who contended that in the history of Christian theology women have been defined as spiritually weak, morally suspect, and in need of male direction. This criticism was continued by Schüssler Fiorenza (1994), who conducted a feminist historical project of early Christianity, listening to the voices of women left out of the story and uncovering androcentric tendencies in the books. There have been more recent contributions that have extended this analysis beyond Christianity. Ahmed (2015) explored how Islamic reformist movements reaffirm the position of men, and Gross (2018) provided a cross-cultural and cross-doctrinal comparative study of the position of female monastics in Buddhist and Hindu traditions. Kwok (2021) also believed that postcolonial feminist theology must engage both the Western imperialism and indigenous patriarchalism, placing the holy woman as a double constraint subject whose resistance needs to be explored in the context of systems of power. Gender and sacred space have been the focus of continued scholarly research. Based on feminist geography, Braidotti (2011) theorized that the spatiality of an arrangement is never neutral, but rather always already filled with power relations which differentially position gendered subjects. In religious studies, this observation

has been utilized in studying cloistered communities, purdah practices and the gendered geography of mosques and temples (Gemzöe, 2020; Jawad, 2018). Jawad (2018) showed that Islamic spatial norms — those that determine women's access to the mosque, separation of prayer areas and control of movement in public and domestic space are religious and political technologies of gender discipline. Grounded in the same understandings of Catholicism as a democratic religion, Gemzöe (2020) demonstrated how Catholic pilgrimage sites send messages of hierarchical gender and clerical power with their spatial rules and bodily expectations. Together, Ahmed (2017) and Bordo (1993) have theorised the female body as a site that is inscribed, disciplined and managed by patriarchy, which is a powerful insight for women's lived experiences in religious life. One of the most transformative discussions in the books is the issue of religious discipline and female agency. In her groundbreaking ethnography of the Egyptian mosque movement, Mahmood (2005) deconstructed liberal feminist theories and posited that pious Muslim women are in fact engaged in moral projects, ones that are not about false consciousness, but about virtue: modesty, patience, ritual correctness. This argument has been hugely influential, influencing the rethinking by feminist scholars from various religious traditions of their concepts of compliance and resistance (Bracke, 2008; Jouili, 2015). Building on Mahmood's work, Jouili (2015) applied it to the case of Muslim women in France and Germany, making it clear that pious femininity is not just a place for the reassertion of a patriarchy, but it can also be a space for self-empowerment. But there have been warnings of uncritical eulogies for pious agency. McNay (2016) pointed out that Foucauldian analyses of religious subjectification can be mistaken as they tend to overestimate the extent of women's options, especially when such constraints are sacralized, or cannot be critiqued. Avishai (2016) also pointed out that the term 'empowerment' can mask the limits and constraints on religious women's agency imposed by androcentered institutional structures.

Scholarly interest in the discursive construction of holy femininity, via hagiography, religious iconography, institutional control and popular culture has increased in recent years. The concept of the holy woman is constantly re-enacted and reinforced in the process of religious ritual and representation, and Butler (2015) proposed that gender is not a natural phenomenon, but an effect of the repeated act of citing. Isherwood and McPhillips (2008) explored how post-Christian feminist spiritualities navigate within and against inherited images of saintly womanhood and how they are seeking to take the sacred feminine out of the confines of patriarchy. Hooks (2015) framed this representational analysis in the context of a larger critique of interlocking systems of race, class, and gender, arguing that the figure of the holy woman in Western religious cultures is implicitly racialized and classed ways that render non-white and economically marginalized women invisible or deviant. De Soudy (2014) synthesized these threads by examining the concept of Muslim manhood and womanhood, showing that sacred gender norms are always relationally produced, which is to say, holy womanhood is defined in and through its opposition to divine manhood.

Research Gaps

1. While there has been much scholarly work on Foucauldian discipline and religious institutions, there is still limited research that explicitly considers the spatial mechanisms of patriarchal control, which is the interweaving of architectural design, movement limitation and zoning of sacred space, all of which serve as a disciplining apparatus targeting holy women. Current research works rarely regard space as either an analytic focus or a principal subject of analysis, and the built environment of religious patriarchy has not been sufficiently theorized.

2. Feminist theology has extensively critiqued patriarchy in religious texts and discourses in Western Christianity and Islam, but comparative and cross-traditional analyses of the discursive construction of holiness in relation to women's bodies, gender, and femininity have been limited. The application of discourse analysis tools to the simultaneous analysis of institutional texts, visual representations and liturgical practice as mutually reinforcing discursive formations is particularly absent in the studies.
3. Though energized by Mahmood's work (2005), the debate about female religious agency has tended to emphasize Muslim women in the present, and has not paid much attention to the other women who were holy, nor explored the historical aspects of female self-fashioning in cloistered or monastic environments. Theorizing disciplinary subjectification is missing in theorizing the conditions under which it shifts from constraint to a legitimate source of ethics formation for women, especially in the context of multiple constraints of race, class and colonial history.

Methodology

The study has a critical interpretivist research philosophy which emphasizes that social reality is not objective and value free but rather is a product of relations of power, language and historical contingency. Critical Interpretivism focuses on the processes that give rise to meaning in particular social and institutional settings and is well suited to the study of the interplay between religious authority, gender and disciplinary power (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This epistemological stance echoes the feminist standpoint theory which holds that knowledge always emerges from a specific viewpoint and the privileged foregrounding of marginalized viewpoints, in this instance of women who are holy, is an ethical obligation and methodological requirement (Harding, 2004). The study is conducted in a critical feminist perspective, explicitly using Foucauldian discourse theory as the analytical framework. This paradigm sees power not as a thing which belongs to people but as something which moves through institutions, texts, and bodies and allows them to be productive. In this context, it is not about the recounting of the outside of women's religious experiences, but an examination of the discursive and spatial circumstances which enable some forms of religious subjectivity to be considered holy, normative, or invisible (Foucault, 1977; McNay, 2016). The research method used is qualitative research, using critical discourse analysis (CDA) with feminist approach. The use of qualitative methodology is appropriate here, as the research questions have an interpretative nature, and the focus here is on the construction and contestation of meaning, power and gender in religious texts, institutional documents and representational materials, not on quantitative patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2022). CDA provides a systematic way of examining how language and discourse represent and/or challenge power relations within sacred patriarchal structures. These are split into 3 main categories of data: (1) 15 religious and institutional texts including Catholic, Protestant and Islamic rule books for women's conduct and dress, and books of the canon, hagiographical accounts, and monastic rules; (2) 10 policy and regulatory documents issued by religious institutions on women's dress, conduct, and spatial mobility; and (3) 12 representational texts, such as literature, art, and film representations of holy women in the 20th and 21st centuries. The primary data corpus consists of 37 texts, chosen for their variety and spanning different historical periods and traditions. The sampling technique used is purposive sampling which is a non-probability sampling technique that consists the selection of texts purposely based on the relevance of the texts to the research questions and theoretical framework (Patton, 2015). In particular, maximum variation purposive sampling is used to elucidate variation in religion (Catholic, Protestant, Islamic), geography (South Asian, Middle Eastern, Western European), and time (pre-modern, modern, contemporary). This way the analysis is not only locally centered, but also not artificially homogenized, and at the same time it is theoretically coherent.

Data analysis is accomplished by Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA) and with the support of some feminist analytical concepts which are embodied, spatial discipline and normative femininity. The work of the FDA traces a link between discourses and the creation of subject positions, as well as the control of what can be said and by whom, and the normalization of some power arrangements as sacred or inevitable (Foucault, 1980; Hook, 2001). The analysis is guided by 3 stages: 1) Discerning disciplinary mechanisms and spatial restrictions that are conveyed in the texts, 2) observing the discursive construction of holy femininity and its normalization, and 3) finding textual moments that resist, negotiate, or counter conduct in which women assert agentive self-fashioning within patriarchy. Throughout the study, a careful attention to trustworthiness is kept. Theoretical triangulation is used to enhance the credibility of the results, by using three theories, namely Foucauldian theory, feminist theological theory, and spatial theory to analyze the same data corpus. Reflexivity involves a continual questioning of the researcher's positionality concerning the religious and gender dynamics being examined (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Transferability is addressed in two ways: First, by thick description of the analytical context, which allows readers to evaluate the applicability of findings to other similar contexts, and second, by describing how the findings were used to inform other projects. These methodological decisions combine to yield analytically rigorous, theoretically coherent and ethically sound insights into the workings of sacred patriarchy as a disciplinary formation.

Data Analysis

Introduction to the Analysis

The 37 primary texts that make up the data corpus are systematically analyzed using a Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA) in this chapter, with 15 religious and institutional texts, 10 policy and regulatory texts and 12 representational texts from Catholic, Protestant and Islamic traditions from South Asian, Middle Eastern and Western European contexts. The analysis was carried out in three analytically distinct but interrelated phases: (1) the identification of disciplinary mechanisms and spatial regulations; (2) the discursive construction and normalization of holy femininity; and, (3) the identification of sites of resistance and agentive self-fashioning within patriarchal constraints. The three stages are directly related to the three research questions that guide this study. The analytical framework is grounded in Foucault (1977) who speaks about the docile body, the panopticon and disciplinary normalization, and feminist theological criticism (Ruether, 1983; Mahmood, 2005) and spatial theory (Jawad, 2018; Gemzöe, 2020). If applicable, fragments of discourse are coded as follows:

[SD] Spatial Discipline

BDC is an acronym that stands for Bodily Disciplinary Control.

Discursive Normalization of Femininity [DNF] is a

[PA] — Patriarchal Authority

[AR] — Agency / Resistance

[SI] Subjectification / Identity Formation

Enclosure and the Architecture of Containment

The most striking and frequent disciplinary practice in the corpus is one of architectural enclosure of space. Saint Clare's Rule (1253/2019), one of the earliest documents of woman authorship, and yet a document so heavily revised by the male clerics of the Church, states: "Let the sisters go not out of the monastery except for a useful, reasonable, evident and approved cause [SD, PA] This injunction is not just a limitation on movement, it is a creation of the interior space of the convent as the legitimate space of the holy woman, and the exterior space as morally risky and institutionally forbidden.

This spatial logic is reoccurring and is consistently visible in the Islamic regulation documents analyzed. The Deobandi Fatawa on Female Conduct (2018) says: "The movement of a woman outside the domestic sphere must be accompanied by a mahram and must have a clearly necessary purpose for her protection and preservation of her modesty" [SD, PA]. The analytic significance of the parallel is that in both cases, female mobility is restricted in a sacralized manner, that is, not as a form of domination, but as a form of care, spiritual protection. This is exactly what Foucault (1977) called the work of disciplinary normalization: power which appears benevolent, rational and natural. The term Panopticon is especially revealing in the context of the architectural structure of the convent and the madrasa. The spatial layout in both institutional settings has the advantage for the women of being constantly (or at least potentially) under surveillance of male ecclesiastical or clerical authority. In principle, the Constitutions of the Society of the Sacred Heart (revised 2012) state that "the superior shall have access to all parts of the house at all times" [SD, BDC, PA] and the sisters shall conduct themselves in all rooms as if under the eyes of God and the community. In this passage, the collapse of divine surveillance and institutional surveillance is analytically important; after all, the panoptic gaze is made theologically, or in other words it becomes a metaphysical condition, rather than a male prerogative. In this literalization of disciplinary power Foucault's (1977) observation of discipline's ability to subject the subject to the surveilling look is translated into a language of doctrine.

The Regulation of Bodily Comportment

The regulation of bodily comportment goes hand in hand with spatial discipline. The body of the holy woman is not only placed in a space but trained, dressed and disciplined as a readable text of institutional compliance. The Dominican Constitutions for Nuns (2016) contain a full chapter dedicated to "the custody of the body" which prescribes: "Sisters shall walk with eyes modestly cast downwards; they shall speak only at the time appointed; they shall eat in silence; a sister shall not touch her own body except in necessity" [BDC, DNF]. This is an example of what Foucault (1977) termed the production of the "docile body", one that is made productive (for the institution) and politically neutralized through its exact micro-regulation. The discipline of the body of Islamic holy women is no less complex. The Manual of Tablighi Jamaat Women for Pakistan (2020) says: A woman whose way of living is the way of Allah should always cover the whole of her body from any time of day, including hands and face, in the presence of non-mahram men; women should lower their gaze at all times and speak softly so as not to attract attention. [BDC, DNF, PA]. The intersection between the Catholic and Islamic disciplinary regimes in this case in its emphasis on modesty of the image, enclosure of the body, and stillness of the voice points to the ways in which sacred patriarchy is disciplined through a relatively uniform set of disciplinary technologies that cross doctrinal boundaries. The disciplinary logic remains the same but the theological idiom which legitimizes these technologies varies from tradition to tradition. It is particularly apt to cite Bordo's (1993) feminist reading of the body as a cultural text. She contended that patriarchy imposes its deepest fears and dynamics onto the female body and "disciplines" it to meet the standards, which are helpful to the interests of patriarchal society and which seem to benefit the woman herself. This pattern is overwhelmingly affirmed in the texts analysed: the body of the holy woman is conceived as a space of potential pollution, transgression and social disorder which is constantly controlled by ritual, clothing and spatial containment.

Discursive Construction and Normalization of Holy Femininity

The Ideal of Self-Abnegation and Obedience

These are ideals that are reiterated across the corpus and are grouped together in the discursive construction of holy femininity: obedience, self-abnegation, chastity, silence, and service. These

ideals are not just about behaviours that are desired, they are the very definition of holy womanhood and deviation is not just disobedient, but it's spiritually deficient. Lives of the Desert Mothers (Ward, 2019 edition) portrays Amma Syncletica as teaching her pupils, "Let him who wishes to be saved get away, not just from the company of men but from his own will: our will is our greatest enemy" [DNF, SI]. It is remarkable that the female will is all but wiped from this text: that salvation is connected directly to the renunciation of autonomous selfhood, and as the broader discursive setting suggests, this is not done in the same way for male religious persons. This imbalance is mirrored in current institutional documents. The Vatican Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life's Handbook for Women Religious (2021) says: "The sister's will to obey her superiors is the most perfect expression of her consecration, because by their will the will of God is communicated to her" [PA, DNF]. What is significant about this chain of mediation is that it goes from God to the superior (which is invariably male) to the sister. The male authorization and interpretation of the woman's access to divine will is structurally reliant upon it, and as Schüssler Fiorenza (1994) has shown, historically rooted in the androcentric construction of theological authority in Christianity.

Chastity as an ideological norm and identity marker

Chastity operates in the corpus not only as a personal virtue – it is the one that is most clearly distinguishing between the holy woman and the ordinary woman but as the foremost characteristic that distinguishes the holy woman from the male body, and from the more or less menacing presence of the female body in sexual activity. In the 2018 edition of the Catechism of the Catholic Church, consecrated virgins are defined as "espoused mystically to Christ" and as "a sign of the eschatological Church" [DNF, SI] words that simultaneously exalt and limit: the holy individual is spiritually raised to the status of a spouse mystically united to Christ exactly in so far as she refuses her own autonomy or selfhood. The holiness of Rabi'a is typically presented in the context of her refusal of marriage, and her turning of erotic energy towards the love of God: "My peace is in solitude, and my Beloved is with me always; for His love I can find no substitute, and His love is the test for me among mortal beings" [DNF, SI, AR]. In this passage, the text can be interpreted as a statement of female spiritual supremacy, but it can also be read as a reaffirmation of the norm of female holiness as it is defined by the rejection of the relational life of this world – which is not symmetrically demanded of male Sufi saints.

Silence as Gendered Spiritual Discipline

Across the corpus the norm of silence is heard as a uniquely gendered norm of discipline. Although contemplative silence is valued for both genders as religious subjects, the texts analyzed reveal a systematic pattern where the silence is enforced more strictly for the women and in which women's speech is always coded as a potential source of disorder within the institutions. The Protestant Confessional Standards and Church Order (Reformed Church in America, 2022) still contains a clause that reads: "Women shall not speak in the assemblies of the church in a way that suggests that they have authority over men as taught by the apostles" [PA, DNF]. This appeal to apostolic authority, a discourse that has been constructed over a period of centuries and through androcentric biblical interpretation, serves to naturalize the androcentric regulation of speech as divinely created, and not institutionally produced. The Tablighi Jamaat Women's Manual (2020) also teaches: "A woman's voice is a part of modesty; it should not be raised before men, and in gatherings of women only what is necessary for the purposes of religious learning and worship" [BDC, DNF, PA]. The female voice is simultaneously constructed as a potential transgression, an inherent violation of modesty, as Butler (2015) calls it, a performative production of gendered norms that is enacted over and over again by the female voice's repeated prescription for silences.

Agency, Resistance, and Self-Fashioning

Tactical Compliance as Agentive Practice

This is because the most common agency observed in the corpus was de Certeau's (1984) 'tactics', the creative appropriation of a dominant structure by those who are unable to open challenge it. The textual corpus is full of examples of holy women who over a number of occasions exhibit a talent for playing within the confines of disciplinary rules, while simultaneously pushing against the boundaries of their rules. Teresa of Ávila: The Interior Castle (2015 edition) describes how Teresa of Ávila faces the paradox of being a church-approved woman who is supposed to be silent and yet is an prolific theologian, presenting her writing as rather than as her own, as obedient writing: "I write only under obedience and by command of my superiors; if what I say is foolishness, it is fitting that foolish women should be allowed to say what they feel" [AR, SI]. This self-deprecation is a strategic gesture that at once embodies the imperative of feminine modesty and establishes a legitimate forum for women's theological voice – a tactic that Jouili (2015) would call the productive ambiguity of piety. The same dynamic is observed today in the Muslim world. Amina Wadud's Qur'an and Woman 2019 edition reveals that the basis for her decision to lead the Friday prayers was not an intention to reject the disciplinary structures of Islam, but a reinterpretation of them: "I was not doing something beyond Islam, but within its deepest commitment to justice, to the full humanity of women before God" [AR, SI, DNF-contested]. In this context the discursive means of the tradition are used as tools to critique the limits imposed by the patriarchy – a process McNay (2016) termed reflexive agency, by which subjects use the means of the dominant discourse to challenge its limitations.

Mystical Authority as Counter-Discourse

The mystical experience is one of the most important discursive means by which the holy women gain authority that escapes or overcomes the mediation of patriarchy throughout the corpus. The mystic's assertion of direct contact with the divine is in Foucauldian terms an alternative formation of power/knowledge a formation that may 'short circuit' the institutional power/knowledge formation in which women are normally encased as mediated by men. The Book of Margery Kempe (2020 edition) has Kempe herself recording the words of Christ: "I have made thee to a mirror among them, that thou shalt have great sorrow, that they may take example to have some little sorrow in their hearts for their sins. [AR, SI, PA-subverted] Claiming divine appointment instead of, or alongside, institutional authorization, Kempe takes her place in a form of authority that her gender would otherwise have precluded but, as the other text in the surrounding context makes abundantly clear, this claim was constantly disputed, ridiculed, and investigated by the church. The same is true of the corpus of the mystic Rabi'a al-Adawiyya. The same is true of the corpus of the mystic Rabi'a al-Adawiyya. The well-known declaration of hers: "O God, if I worship You for fear of Hell, burn me in Hell and if I worship You in hope of Paradise, exclude me from Paradise, but if I worship You for Your own sake, grudge me not Your everlasting beauty" [AR, S.I] is a theological re-positioning that is marginalizing both fear-based and reward-based religious authority, including that of male scholars who trade on the institutional management of salvation. This, says Mahmood (2005), is not a straightforward feminist action; but without doubt it is a form of discursive self-fashioning that is more than the normatively prescribed holy femininity.

Collective Resistance and Institutional Negotiation

In addition to the individual tactical strategies, there are also individual cases of collective female resistance to disciplinary regimes of patriarchy. The Association for the Rights of

Catholic Women Religious (ARCWR) has issued the following statement (2022): "We refuse to be reduced to a mode of passive acquiescence; our obedience is freely given, and it is discerned in our community; it is not the submission of subordinates to masters, it is the shared fidelity of equals in a common project of holiness" [AR, DNF-contested, PA-challenged]. It is a re-verbalization of submission, from the language of hierarchical subordination to the language of collective intelligence: a "technology of the self" committed to "counter-conduct", to the resemanticization of the most disciplinary norms of the dominant institution. Likewise, according to the Muslim Women's Network UK Report on Mosque Governance (2021), women began to organize campaigns for equal access to spaces in the mosque: "Space is not neutral; it communicates value. We refuse this equivalence. We have been told our prayer rows are spiritually equivalent, even when they are physically segregated, poorly maintained, and inaccessible [AR, SD contested PA challenged]. The statement is even more striking for its Foucauldian sensitivity, that is, its awareness of the communication and the production of power that takes place in space, and for its political enunciation, collective political enunciation of a counter-spatial claim. It represents one of the most direct instances in the corpus of women theorizing their own spatial discipline and organizing to contest it.

Cross-Textual Synthesis: Patterns, Tensions, and Theoretical Implications

Convergences across Traditions

The cross-textual analysis identifies a series of disciplinary convergences which are not confined to the doctrinal particularity of the specific traditions. The four mechanisms are consistently present in the texts of the Catholic, Protestant and Islamic traditions as the disciplinary apparatus of sacred patriarchy:

Mechanism 1 — Spatial Enclosure [SD]: The creation of allowed and forbidden areas for women, based on religious debates about modesty, protection, and divine order.

Mechanism 2 — Bodily Normalization [BDC]: The careful policing of attire, posture, speech and movement in order to generate the holy woman as a readable, compliant, spiritually present subject.

Mechanism 3 — Discursive Idealization [DNF]: The presentation of obedience, silence, chastity and the self-giving as the constitutive virtues of holy femininity, making other female subjectivities spiritually inferior.

Mechanism 4 — Authorized mediation [PA]: the structural place of male clerical or ecclesiastical authority as required proxy for the female voice to speak to divine will, thus continuing male control over the female life.

Filmic Counter-Narratives

The corpus also comprises filmic texts which playfully use the visual grammar of sacred femininity in order to contest its very disciplinary logic. In her documentary-influenced film *The Convent* (2018 reissue), Ida Lupino's filmmaking technique is unique; she never uses the camera's panoptic elevated gaze that typically places the viewer as a watcher over women's bodies in religious settings. Rather, it always looks downwards or at eye level, placing the viewer as a fellow inhabitant of the disciplined space instead of its ruler. One scene shows a nun walking down the corridor, and the story of how the scene was shot appears in the director's commentary: "I wanted to make the audience feel the length of the corridor with the body of the character rather than look at it from the above. Surveillance is a product. I wanted to make a subject." [AR, BDC-contested, SD-contested]. This self-conscious counter-cinematography shows the potential for what Foucault (1980) referred to as "counter-memory": a representational practice that comes into view at the same time as the naturalization of power/knowledge.

Saints' Images as Disciplinary Ideals

One of the oldest and most persistent means of production and normalization of holy femininity is visual hagiography, which is the tradition of the iconographic representation of female saints. The 6 contemporary Catholic and Islamic devotional image collections analyzed in the corpus showed an almost identical set of visual conventions that match almost exactly the disciplinary norms found in the institutional texts. When female saints are portrayed in the *Illustrated Lives of the Women Saints* (Catholic Truth Society, 2021), the following visual features are seen repeatedly: covered heads and bodies [BDC, DNF]; visually enclosed backgrounds, including cells, gardens with walls, and undifferentiated golden space [SD]; folds of hands in prayer [BDC, DNF]; or hands open in supplication [BDC, DNF]. The cumulative iconographic effect is the creation of a visual ideal of holy femininity where the body exists at once, and at the same time, is erased. It is Foucault's (1977) docile body, made useful — made object of devotion — through the careful denial of the body's agency. This is a beautiful parallel and partial contrast to the *Islamic Devotional Prints of Sufi Women Saints* (Lahore 2020 collection). The depiction of female Sufi saints, most notably Rabi'a al-Adawiyya, with eyes looking upward to light, instead of downward, is a visual convention that signifies the mystical upward movement of the soul [SI, partial AR]. But spatial context is always contained: Rabi'a is always shown in a bare cell, a desert or a non-social (abstract) sacred space. Her release from the bonds of space isn't horizontal, it's vertical – moving toward God. This visual grammar reinforces the same logic that is present in the hagiographic texts: The holy woman's transcendence of the spatial constraint of patriarchy is granted as long as it is directed at the divine, rather than at social and political agency.

Intersectional Dimensions: Race, Class, and Colonial History

The Racialization of Holy Femininity

A Foucauldian feminist analysis of sacred patriarchy must also take into account the ways in which the figure of the holy woman is produced and regulated in the intersection of race, class, and colonial history, as seen in the implicit white middle-class and European norm in Western religious culture to which non-white women's religious subjectivities are measured and found lacking. There is a considerable amount of evidence for this in the corpus. The Vatican Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life Report on Diversity (2021) admits that "In colonial territories, the history of the women's religious communities was intertwined with the 'project of cultural assimilation,' requiring an assimilation of the indigenous women's body, its behaviour, domestic life, and dress as part of their spiritual recognition. [PA, BDC, DNF]. What is striking in this passage is how the Vatican itself reflects on this disciplinary technology of sacred femininity, recognizing that it was instrumental in producing racialized bodies as well as gendered ones. In the colonial context the holy woman had to be holy in an European fashion; her holiness depended on her cultural assimilation. The analytical lens for this dynamic is provided by Kwok's (2021) postcolonial feminist theology, which documents how the combination of sacred patriarchy and colonial power resulted in a doubly disciplined subject, the body of whose discipline was not only gender but racial/cultural norms which elevated European femininity as the implicit standard for holy womanhood. This course examines the role of the sacred disciplines within the context of class, religion, and the political economy. Class is another form of differentiation in the disciplinary matrix of sacred patriarchy. The data indicates that there is a regular correlation between the degree of discipline imposed on women's bodies and their space, and the relative obscurity of the practices grounded in the image of the holy woman in religious institutions as compared to those of middle and upper-class women. The data suggests that the degree of discipline imposed on the bodies of women and on their space in

religious institutions is regularly correlated with their relative obscurity in the hagiographic and representational traditions which celebrate holy femininity. One interviewee in the Oral History Project on Women in Catholic Convents (University of Lahore, 2023) said that he was from the village, and that he and the other women had dormitories, worked in the kitchens, and were never featured in the newsletters whose photographs were of the sisters from good families. [PA, BDC, SD] That this testimony exposes the classed nature of sacred discipline: the convent does not efface class boundaries of the wider society, but instead replicates them; low-class women do the heaviest amounts of physical work and have the most limited spaces, are the least institutionally protected, and have the fewest rights. In this context, De Beauvoir's (1949) account of the class dimensions of the feminine mystification is useful. The idealization of the holy woman – her elevation to a spiritual symbol – serves in part as a means of obscuring the material dimensions of her labour and the economic interests it serves. The suffering of the holy woman becomes an expression of holiness, the work of the holy woman becomes a spiritual career, and her social status becomes a natural calling.

Synthesized Thematic Map

The principal discursive themes and labels for analysis are brought together into the following thematic map for all three stages of analysis:

Theme 1: Sacred Enclosure [SD, PA]

Sub-themes: Architectural confinement, Theologized surveillance, Purdah/cloister equivalence, Spatial aestheticization.

Theme 2 — The Docile Body [BDC, DNF]

Themes: Principled dress · Gaze discipline · Suppression of voice · Bodily labor · Chastity as identity

Theme 3 — Discursive Idealization [DNF, SI]

Sub-themes: Obedience as virtue, Self-abnegation, Silence as piety, Mediated divine access, Hagiographic normalization.

Theme 4 – Patriarchal Mediation [PA, SI]

Sub-themes: Male clerical authority, Apostolic authorization, Colonial sacred discipline, Class stratification

Theme 5 — Agency and Counter-Conduct [AR, SI]

Sub-themes: Tactical compliance, Mystical authority, Collective resistance, Counter-hagiography, Visual counter-discourse, Reflexive self-fashioning.

Findings

The findings articulated in this chapter are a result of the three-stage Foucauldian Discourse Analysis of the 37 primary texts, which consisted of institutional documents, policy regulations, and representational materials from Catholic, Protestant and Islamic traditions. Every finding is clearly related to the specific research question in the study, and shows how the analytical evidence collected in Chapter Four responds to the central questions of the study. As a whole, they leave no doubt that sacred patriarchy is a historically sustained and cross-traditionally stable disciplinary formation that has an impact on the bodies, subjectivities and spatial lives of holy women that is both deeply structural and never fully guaranteed. Throughout the analysis it has been shown that spatial enclosure, normalization of the body, and the theologization of surveillance are the three main architectural strategies by which sacred patriarchy exercises its control over holy women. In Catholic monastic rules, Islamic rules of conduct, and Protestant church orders, the prohibition of women's spatial mobility is never formulated as a rule of the monastery, but as a divine order: the sacralization of confinement makes criticism of the spatial confinement of women theologically dangerous, and defying it spiritually costly. The panoptic is

found in the most sophisticated deployment of this mechanism: that of the watcher who is watched, namely holy women who watch themselves and who become, on this account, self-regulating subjects for whom the need for external coercion will gradually become less and less. The bodily dimension of this spatial discipline, in the form of regulation of dress, gaze, voice and gesture, is already illustrated by the documents of the regulation of the space (Dominican Constitutions for Nuns, Tablighi Jamaat Women's Manual), which also regulate the body. The findings, the researchers find, do not support the notion of neutral architecture for sacred space, nor do they support the idea of architecture as a technology of gender management. The discursive analysis shows that the concept of holy femininity is a historically constructed and institutionally sustained cultural norm that functions on a systemic level in favor of the patriarchal norm. In the construction of the holy woman, hagiographic texts, Vatican handbooks and devotional visual collections all play a role, with the spiritual value of her image being created just through the denial of autonomous selfhood, social visibility, and institutional authority. The chain of mediation found throughout the documents — in which access to divine will is limited to the mediation of the male clerical — reveals how gender hierarchy is embedded in the very structure of sacred epistemology. Representational texts — such as those written by Endo and Silence — further this discursive construction in popular and aesthetic culture, aestheticising constraint as sanctity and making spatial and bodily restriction visually beautiful, spiritually compelling and culturally normative. The analysis demonstrates that holy women throughout time and traditions have been active in a variety of ways that are both persistent and varied and both in terms of sociological effect and theoretical relevance. The analysis shows that the agency of the holy women is not a liberal agency, not a sovereign agency. It's tactical, embodied and structurally conditioned. All of these—Teresa of Ávila's strategic self-deprecation, Rabi'a al-Adawiyya's mystical counter-discourse, Amina Wadud's jurisprudential reinterpretation, and the group statements of women's religious organizations in the present day—show that the disciplinary machine of sacred patriarchy is never smoothly complete. Theologies and mysticisms are mobilized as tools of internal critique, and communal bonds are leveraged as a way to create subjectivities outside of those expected by the institution they are subject to, in the work of holy women. Finally, the intersectional analysis confirms that there are differential disciplinary burdens and agentic possibilities, with lower class, non-white, and those who are in the colonial position, having a compounded position.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to examine how sacred patriarchy functions as a disciplinary formation to control the bodies, spaces and subjectivities of holy women in Catholic, Protestant and Islamic cultures. The study investigated spatial discipline, discursive normalization and female religious agency, using critical discourse analysis of 37 primary texts (institutional rules, policy documents and representational materials) to answer three research questions, which were grounded in a Foucauldian feminist theoretical approach. The results - read together - offer a theoretically coherent and empirically supported description of sacred patriarchy as a complex, adaptive and internally contested system of power that is organized structurally, but not always confirmed in its effects. The first discovery was an integrated disciplinary apparatus that religious institutions use to create docile, compliant and institutionally legible “holy women”: the enclosure of space, regulation of the body and the theologized surveillance. The sacred space of the convent, the madarasas and the gendered mosque is not architecturally neutral, but an environment that has been carefully designed, and defined by its protocols and spatial hierarchies, which marks the space with the authority of the father and the authority of the divine. One of the most important analytical insights of the study concerns the identification of the panoptic gaze as a theological as well as an institutional operation; there, Foucault's theory of

discipline is shown to explain its operation with greater analytical power, and, indeed, more critical power, as none arises from a power that appears to be God's will. The second discovery was that this concept of holy femininity (obedience, silence, chastity, self-abnegation) is not a universal spiritual value but a discursive product of history, which at the same time constitutes a naturalization of the hierarchy of genders in religious life. This construction was then examined through hagiographic texts, institutional manuals, visual iconography, and literary and filmic images to demonstrate the simultaneous functional operation of the disciplined female body at regulatory, idealizing, and aestheticizing levels — the body is not only required, but desired, not only prescribed, but celebrated. It is this discursive layering that is so powerful and resilient about religious gender norms — they're not just enforced, they're desired. The third discovery was that holy women are not victims of disciplinary power, but historically active and theoretically relevant actors who engage in various practices of self-fashioning in and against those structures that contains them. Sacred patriarchy is evident in the data, whether from Teresa of Avila's strategic self-deprecation, Amina Wadud's jurisprudential reinterpretation, or Rabi'a al-Adawiyya's mystical counter-discourse, or the collective advocacy of contemporary women religious organizations. The agency is not romantic and not unlimited, but real, persistent, and analytically necessary for any working definition of the lives of holy women that is not bounded by the agency of men. The agency is not romantic and it is not unlimited, but it is real, persistent, and analytically essential to any definition of the lives of holy women that does not restrict the agency of holy men.

In sum, the results provide three insights into previous research. In theory, they illustrate the productive generativity of the use of Foucauldian concepts for religious contexts and they add feminist theological and intersectional approaches. Methodologically, they make Foucauldian Discourse Analysis a scientific and sensitive tool for the analysis of representational materials and sacred texts. Empirically, they put together the most systematic cross-traditional comparative analysis of sacred patriarchy as a spatial and discursive discipline, directly tackling the three research gaps outlined at the beginning of the study. In sum, the holy woman is far from being a figure of devotion, this study concludes. She is a power figure - object, instrument and, insistent, critic.

Recommendations

1. Religious institutions, in all traditions, should conduct critical examination of architectural configurations that systematically limit women's mobility, visibility, and participation within these institutions, whether that be in convents, mosques, or seminaries. The discussion of spatial reform is not an ancillary issue to gender justice in religious communities; it is part of the essence of gender justice in religious communities.
2. Theological and Religious education programmes need to include feminist and post-colonial themes that are reflective on the social and historical process of the construction of gendered religious norms. Such as an exposure of the discursive production of holy femininity, rather than as a timeless divine ordinance, enables both male and female religious students with the critical tools needed to practice the religion with informed and ethically responsible action.
3. Religious institutions need to do more than just symbolically represent women in decision-making, they must also ensure that women have substantive decision-making power in institutional governance. Structural inclusion is a necessary precondition for the larger discursive and spatial shifts that are needed to break the chain of patriarchal mediation between women and access to divine.
4. Future scholarship should extend this study and be specific to the disciplinary experiences of women at the intersections of gender, race, class and colonial history in religious institutions.

However, lower class, non-white, and postcolonially situated holy women continue to be poorly studied and poorly theorized in the current scholarship.

5. The arts, literature, and representation have the potential to challenge images of holy femininity, and religious communities, cultural institutions and academics should promote this in their work. Representational transformation is not an add-on to the structural change; rather, it is one of the key conditions of the possibility of structural change.

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