

Women reclaiming their spiritual spaces

Nitasha Moothoo-Padayachie spoke to various female religious leaders on issues of spirituality, faith, religion, gender roles, sexuality and the changing roles of women leaders in various spiritual and religious organisations. These interviews were conducted via email and fax. The opinions of the interviewees do not necessarily reflect the views of Agenda.

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What challenges do you face as a woman in religious and spiritual leadership?

I face challenges because I am a Buddhist. Buddhism is one of the fastest growing religions, but it is still new to the western world, and many people don't understand it. In South Africa, it is often viewed with suspicion.

How has your history influenced your current religious leadership role as a woman?

When I started working at a large law firm in Johannesburg, I was the only woman attorney, so I faced extra pressures. This was difficult, but it helped me to go beyond traditional gender roles.

How does your work propagate your beliefs around the role(s) of women?

Spiritual work and spiritual life makes no distinction between men and women, because your essence, or spirit, is neither male nor female.

Have you noticed a difference between the roles of women and men in religious festivals? How are these roles assigned?

Traditional religious ceremonies and rituals are mostly still performed by men. These roles were assigned on the basis of our past history, when women played a subservient role, but things are changing. In the past, it was thought that you could not attain enlightenment in a female body. This is no longer the position today. Women have achieved spiritual liberation from secondary status.

How does your role as a woman in leadership challenge stereotypical gender roles?

Female spiritual leaders affirm the capacity and equality of women. Women are just as competent as men, and can make even better leaders, because they are often more connected to their intuition. They have the creative

energy within them, and they are capable of giving birth to many beautiful things, in a nurturing, rather than exploitative, way.

Do other members of your religion support your leadership role?

Buddhism is still new in South Africa, and those of us who run Buddhist Centres are spiritual pioneers. In Buddhism, one takes refuge in the Triple Gem: the Buddha, the Dharma (teachings of the Buddha) and the Sangha (spiritual community). We derive our support from living according to the Buddha's teachings, and we share this way of life with others.

What do you define as 'faith'?

Faith is similar to trust or confidence. The Buddha taught a Noble Path, that leads one from a state of suffering towards enlightened freedom from all suffering. When you start living according to this Path, and your life starts improving, you develop faith in the teachings. Your faith comes from your own experience.

Please provide a brief summary of the underlying doctrine of your belief.

The Buddha taught that all beings have Buddha Nature (the essence of godliness). All beings have Divine Nature, even if it is presently heavily obscured, and all beings have the potential to

become a Buddha. Buddhism emphasises spiritual evolution. It does not believe that you are 'saved' by someone else, but that you are responsible for your own salvation. You have to walk that Path yourself.

Do you think that women in religious and spiritual leadership receive a voice in government?

Religion/spirituality in the form of ethics, should play a role in government. If people in positions of authority had a strong background in ethical living, then much corruption, injustice and harm would be prevented. This background should not be exclusive to any one religion, because then conflicts and wars are created in the name of religion. A spiritual understanding of the deeper aspects of life would bring wise leadership to government.

What is the stance of your religion on inter-racial and same-sex marriages?

The most important thing in a marriage is love and respect and commitment, not the colour of

a person's skin. In Buddhism, the principle of non-harming is more important than the external form. Same-sex relationships are acceptable, as long as they promote the happiness and wellbeing of both parties. There is no one 'official' position, and different schools of Buddhism may have different approaches.

What are the highlights of your career as a woman in spiritual and religious leadership?

I am not a leader, but a spiritual friend and aspiring Bodhisattva, (one who is walking the Path to Enlightenment for the benefit of all beings). Highlights have been attending teachings and spending time in the presence of truly great Spiritual Beings, like His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Venerable Thich Nhat Hanh, my spiritual Master.