

# The Black Madonna

Subjects: Others

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The Black Madonna, with origins in Africa, is a prominent example of how African beliefs have been integrated into other faiths in ways that are often obscured from view. The Black Madonna is compared with the characteristics and symbolism of the traditional fair-skinned Virgin Mary. It is estimated that there are hundreds of depictions of the Black Madonna, yet her identity as truly black is generally minimized. This review contributes a theoretical rationale for the lack of recognition and acceptance of the Madonna as black, contextualizing this within a feminist theoretical viewpoint and analyzing the connection to African folklore and traditional religious beliefs. The theoretical framework articulated in this paper contributes an elucidation of the ways that indigenous African religions have affected other world religions. Acknowledging this influence challenges the simplistic notion of reified distinctions between Western and non-Western religions.

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

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## 1. Introduction

Because of reluctance on the part of traditional Christianity and the Catholic Church to accept the idea that the Madonna is black (Georgieff 2016) <sup>[1]</sup>, there is an array of theories as to why she is depicted as such in statues, paintings, and icons (Begg 2006; Birnbaum 2000, 2001) <sup>[2][3][4]</sup>. These views are attempts at discounting her prominent role. Some theories involved the belief in secrets held by the Catholic Church and mysteries involving the cult of the Black Virgin as a representation of equal rights for women (Begg 2006) <sup>[2]</sup>. Traditional Madonnas represent purity and obedience, whereas Black Madonnas are strong and powerful. One type of denial in explaining why the Madonna is black is because she has darkened over time due to age, smoke, and grime (Georgieff 2016) <sup>[1]</sup>. An older theory suggested that she really was white but was then considered black because of age and environmental conditions. In some cases, such as Madonnas in Avellino and Lucera, Italy, Black Madonnas have been painted white (Birnbaum 2000) <sup>[3]</sup>. Another theory is that she represents the indigenous population of a region such as Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico. This is logical because Our Lady of Guadalupe is honored in Mexico, a nation of darker-toned people; however, this does not explain her hue in other Madonna representations. Since there is not one common belief of what Mary looked like, it is reasonable to accept the artist's point of view in creating a Mary or a Madonna which looks like people within one's own culture. Examples of this can be found in Jacqueline Orsini's (Orsini 2000) <sup>[5]</sup> depiction of numerous Madonnas in which the watercolor painting of Mary and Child in China has Asian features sitting under a flowering tree whereas Paul Gauguin's La Orana Maria (Ave Maria) has Tahitian features placed in a tropical setting. Orsini's book is an example of how artists have depicted the Madonna as connected to many and varied cultures.

There are more than five-hundred known Black Madonna statues and paintings worldwide and Ean Begg speculated that devotion to Mary developed from the esoteric popular religion common among the Templars and Cathars which was forced underground and deemed heretical. At the center of their beliefs was the divine feminine and the perception of women as compassionate, intelligent, and possessing social roles other than wife (Perot 2008) <sup>[6]</sup>. Much scholarship about the Black Madonna argued that Templars were responsible for bringing statues and paintings back from the Holy Land during the Crusades; there are Black Madonnas in numerous Templar cathedrals and churches and they are vividly apparent in the Cathedral of Notre Dame de Chartres in France which has three. Similar to Birnbaum, Carol Winters (2006) <sup>[7]</sup>, claimed that the Catholic Church remained silent about the origins and presence of the Black Madonna because she represents the feminine principle that started at the dawn of human consciousness as Mother Earth from whom all life emanated. This is consistent with African folk religion viewing God as female, creator of humankind. Begg viewed her almost unknown status as one of disinterest on the part of scholars and art historians or her depictions are considered crude, difficult to examine or date, or even grotesque. He made this claim by stating that a large proportion of ancient miraculous Madonnas of the world are black, yet so little is known about their existence. The exception is the Black Virgin of Padua because it is by the famous Italian artist, Donatello. Making note of the distinction between the Black Madonna and other depictions of Mary is significant because of the symbolism behind both types of representation. The Black Madonna is associated with Mother, Creator, and Protector of the Earth, a supreme advisor, one who understands the struggles of life, and a spiritual intervening force. Light-skinned or local cultural Madonnas are important

too; however, the connotations associated with them are as the Mother of God, obedient to His will, living a life of virginity, pure, without sin, and the holiest of holy. She too answers prayers and understands sorrow and pain, especially the type of pain she experienced when her Son was crucified.

In discussing how the Catholic Church needed to alter doctrine for the suppression of women's roles to be maintained, [Perot \(2008\)](#) <sup>[6]</sup> noted how it was necessary for Jesus to be born via an immaculate conception in order to be free of original sin; subsequently, Mary ceased to be mortal since, in 1854, the Church declared that she too was not conceived in original sin. This provided rationale for dissociation from Eve, portrayed as sinful, and subsequent association with Mary, a virgin, sinless and pure. In fact, in 431 A.D., at the Council of Ephesus, the same location where the repressed goddess temple Artemis once stood, Mary was proclaimed by the Christian fathers as "God-bearer" ([Perot 2008](#)) <sup>[6]</sup>. About one hundred years earlier, the Cathars and Gnostic traditions were suppressed, in which a climate of tolerance prevailed, and God was perceived as both mother and father and women held equal rank with men ([Perot 2008](#)) <sup>[6]</sup>.

## 2. Trends in Traditional Religions

Worship of the Black Madonna remains primarily in Europe, yet rates of Christian affiliation continue to decline. The [Pew Research Center \(2015\)](#) <sup>[8]</sup> estimates that the Christian population in Europe will drop by about 100 million people, falling from 553 million in 2010 to 454 million in 2050. A similar pattern exists in the U.S.A. with a downward trend in weekly church attendance and affiliation of Christians. Catholic affiliation has also declined; currently 20.8 percent from 25 percent just a decade ago; however, growth in the Hispanic population has overshadowed much of the decrease ([Lipka and Gecewicz 2017](#)) <sup>[9]</sup>. According to a recent Gallup Poll, it is not only Catholicism that has declined in membership in the United States; the decline in the number of Christians corresponds to the rise in Americans who claim no religious affiliation ([Lipka and Gecewicz 2017](#)) <sup>[9]</sup>. People who identify as atheists or agnostics, and those who say their religion is "nothing in particular" now account for a combined 23 percent of the adult population (up from 16 percent in 2007). This trend has occurred across many demographic groups (men, women, older, younger, different levels of education, different races and ethnicities). The share of Americans who identify as non-Christian has increased by only one percent since 2007—up from five percent to six percent and is predominately Muslim and Hindu. In addition, more Americans now say they are spiritual rather than religious. According to [Hackett and McClendon \(2017\)](#) <sup>[10]</sup>, about 27 percent of Americans think of themselves as spiritual which is up eight percent in the past five years. This, too, has occurred across a wide spectrum of the population and not specific to any one demographic group. The number of adult Americans who view themselves as religious (54 percent) has gone down by eleven percent since 2012. These statistics mirror the belief that a growing number of Americans say it is not necessary to believe in God to be moral and have good values—56 percent, up from 49 percent in 2011 ([Smith 2017](#)) <sup>[11]</sup>. "A lot of people don't want to be part of an organized religious community which they see as formal, traditional, dictatorial, boring, and predictable," according to Reverend Elizabeth Lerner Maclay, a lifelong Unitarian Universalist ([Ahmad 2013](#)) <sup>[12]</sup>. Conversely, adherents of various folk religions—including African traditional religions, Chinese folk religions, Native American religions, and Australian aboriginal religions—are projected to increase by 11 percent, from 405 million to nearly 450 million. Regarding religious practices and affiliations, perhaps we are now going in a more inclusive direction which may include greater gender equality.

[Lucia Birnbaum \(2012\)](#) <sup>[13]</sup> stated that Africa has given the world values that existed before and they currently have crucial relevance for a world that faces spiritual and actual extinction; Africans have kept their connection with the earth, maintaining matriarchal families and an oral tradition transmitted by mothers to their children. Birnbaum also mentioned the work of Emmanuel Anati, who in 1999, substantiated in rock art the premise that Africans were the founders of Abrahamic religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Even in India, a country with less than three percent Christians, the Madonna was venerated by millions of Hindus and other non-Christians ([Ghosh 2013](#)) <sup>[14]</sup>. [Palash Ghosh \(2013\)](#) <sup>[14]</sup> related this phenomenon to the adoration of mother goddess figures such as Durga and Kali; people see Mary as a figure who can answer their prayers and one in which divine intervention is sought. She applied this great devotion to Mary as a type of universality in the world's faiths that sometimes is obscured in the long-standing debates between the East and the West. In addition, other cultures continue to maintain an unbroken tradition of goddess worship such as Native Americans, some Southeast Asians, and Tibetans ([Perot 2008](#)) <sup>[6]</sup>. If scholars have greater insight into people's religious beliefs, careful attention to historical information and contemporary data can help bridge the time gap between the past and the present ([Zaccaria 2010](#)) <sup>[15]</sup>.

[Woodhead \(2012\)](#) <sup>[16]</sup> reports that the World Values and European Values Surveys which were collected between 1995 and 2001 found that gender equality is linked to economic growth, legal reforms, and, above all, religiosity and religious values reflected in cultural factors. [Woodhead's \(2012\)](#) <sup>[16]</sup> implication was that religion is a system of power that can either reinforce existing power relations or attempt to change them. Women have made gains in equality in many dimensions of life such as in the workplace and in the political arena ([Al-Kohlani 2018](#)) <sup>[17]</sup>, yet at the same time, equality

in some patriarchal religions remains elusive, while in others we see the beginnings of significant change. Notably, women still cannot become priests in Catholicism, nor can they be rabbis in Orthodox Judaism or lead men in prayer in Islam. Yet, in the Episcopal Church, women are now priests and, in Reform Judaism, women are rabbis. Power relationships are changing as women receive greater recognition for their worth and societal contributions (Al-Kohlani 2018) <sup>[17]</sup>. The argument here is consistent with the economic model proposed by Catherine Wessinger (2020) <sup>[18]</sup>, who views socio-economic factors as supporting gender roles in conjunction with religious norms. She considers a gendered division of labor as reinforcing gender inequality. Yet, since the socio-economic situation is changing for the better, religion is supporting the transition toward women's equality. A society's gender roles are reflected in and reinforced by religious narratives, myths, concepts of divinity, and religious leadership roles and whether they are accessible to women; therefore, as women access higher levels of education and achieve greater economic earnings, they can assert their right to equality (Wessinger 2020) <sup>[18]</sup>. Similar recognition is true for folk religions. As rates of Christian affiliation decline, it is anticipated that membership in folk religions, including African folk religions, will increase in membership.

### 3. Advancing a New African Feminist Theory of Religion

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

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

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

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