ANDROCENTRISM refers to cultural perspectives where the male is generically taken to be the norm of human- ness. Androcentrism originates from a male monopoly on cultural leadership and the shaping and transmission of culture. In religion this means that males monopolize priestly and teaching roles of religion and exclude women both from the exercise of these roles and from the education that such roles require. Thus women are prevented from bringing their own experience and point of view to the shaping of the official public culture of religion, however much they may participate in the religion as consumers of the public cult or in auxiliary cults restricted to women. The official public definition of the religion in terms of law, cult, and symbol is defined both without female participation and in such a way as to justify their exclusion.

Women’s exclusion from the learning and shaping of the cult and symbol system also means that they do not participate in the processes by which a religion remembers and transmits its traditions. As a result, religions or religious practices that do not exclude women are forgotten or are remembered in a way that makes this participation appear deviant. Androcentric religious culture makes woman the “other”; woman’s silence and absence are normative. Consequently, her presence is remarked upon only to reinforce her otherness, either by definitions of “woman’s place” or by remonstrances against women who are deemed to have “gotten out of their place.”

Androcentric culture also translates the dialectics of human existence—superiority/inferiority, right/left, light/ darkness, active/passive, life/death, reason/feeling, and so forth—into androcentric gender symbolism. In this gender symbolism the female is always the “other”: inferior in relation to superior, weaker in relation to stronger, negative in relation to positive. Even when the qualities assigned to women are positive, such as love or altruism, these are defined in such a way as to be supplemental or auxiliary to a male-centered definition of the self. The female becomes the unconscious that completes the conscious, the affectivity that completes rationality. Thus, despite the appearance of balance in such gender complementarity, the female is always relative and complementary to the male, rather than herself the one who is complemented or completed in her own right.

Androcentrism must be seen as a pervasive influence on all religious cultures, having shaped either those religious cultures themselves or the way they have developed or the way they have been reported upon and studied, or in many cases all three. The fact that this influence has remained largely unnoticed is itself an expression of its pervasiveness. It has been so pervasive and normative that it itself has not even been noticeable, since one cannot notice a given point of view unless another point of view is also possible.

Androcentrism pervades all aspects of the religious culture—its view of human nature, its definitions of good and evil, its creation stories, its images of the divine, its laws, rituals, polity, and practices of worship. One could illustrate this from many religions, but in this essay the illustrations will be drawn from the Judeo-Christian tradition. In this tradition, although the two creation stories in the Book of Genesis, chapters 1 and 2, offer alternative possibilities, religious anthropology has in fact been drawn from the second. Here the male is the norm, the one created first; woman is created second and taken by God from man’s rib. This is a very peculiar story, since it reverses the actual experience of human birth, in which both males and females are born from the female. By making a male God the midwife of the birth of the female from the side of the male, it defines woman’s place as auxiliary and secondary to the male. So normative is this assumption that few Christians even notice the oddness of the story, its reversal of actual human birth.

This place of woman as secondary and auxiliary to the male has been evident in all classical Christian anthropology. Christian anthropology operates within a dualistic framework that sets the good human self, created in the “image of God,” in tension with an evil self that has lost or diminished its originally good human nature and positive relation to God. Although the Genesis 1 story defines both male and female equally as possessing the image of God, all classical Christian anthropology has regarded the male as the normative image of God in such a way as to make woman the image of either the lower or the fallen part of the self. While it is never denied that women possess some relationship to the image of God, they are seen as related to that image only under and through their relationship to the male, rather than in their own right. In themselves, women are said to image the body that is to be ruled over by the mind, or else the sin-prone part of the self that causes sin and the Fall.

This androcentric definition of humanity is evident in Augustine’s treatise on the Trinity (De Trinitate 7.7.10):

How then did the apostle tell us that man is the image of God and therefore he is forbidden to cover his head, but that the woman is not so and therefore she is commanded to cover hers? Unless forsooth according to that which I have said already when I was treating of
Deeply embedded in this Christian definition of female subordinate and auxiliary existence is the story of female primacy in sin. Although the story of Eve’s role in the expulsion from Paradise is by no means a normative story for the Old Testament or even for the Christian Gospels, through the Pauline tradition it assumed normative status for defining the human predicament in such a way that not only all Christian theology but the Bible itself is read with this presupposition. Female primacy in sin is the underside of woman’s subordination in the divinely ordained nature of things: things got out of hand for humanity and its relationship to God in the beginning because woman got out of hand. Woman acting on her own initiative caused sin to come into the world and Adam to be expelled from Paradise. He is punished by the alienation of his work, but she is punished by the alienation of her humanity. She must now bring forth children in sorrow and be under the subjugation of her husband.

This story operates to justify female subordination in society and religion. This status of subordination had now been redoubled and reinforced as divine punishment for an original sin of acting on her own. Any efforts of women to act on their own, rather than as auxiliaries in a male-defined social order, can then be seen as new evidence of sinful female propensities—propensities that are to be repressed by reference to this original sin that caused everything to go awry. Woman acting on her own initiative can only do evil and cause chaos. She can never do good by herself, but only when she restricts herself to obedient response to male commands.

The androcentric presuppositions of the Christian view of creation and sin are maintained also in the definitions of salvation. The redeemer, the Messiah, the manifestation of God in the flesh, appears in male form. This maleness of the Christian redeemer could be regarded as a historical or cultural accident, similar to the fact that he is Jewish and appears in a particular time and place. These particularities in no way limit his ability to represent universal humanity. Yet Christian theology has in fact typically treated Jesus’ maleness differently from his Jewishness, so as to make that male-ness ontologically necessary to his ability to represent God. For Thomas Aquinas, the maleness of Jesus flows directly from the fact that the male is the normative or “perfect” expression of the human species, while woman is non-normative and defective. Thus to represent the fullness of human nature, it is necessary that Jesus be male. Here we see clearly the androcentric presupposition whereby the male possesses a generic humanity that is both complete in itself and capable of encompassing the representation of woman as well, while the woman cannot even represent herself, much less the male, as a human being.

This androcentric definition of Christology or the necessary maleness of the incarnation points in two directions. On the one side, it reveals the presumed maleness of God. On the other side, it excludes women from the priesthood and from representation of Christ’s and God’s divine authority in church leadership. Although Christian theology does not claim that God is in a literal sense male, there is an overwhelming bias in Christian theology, itself derived from its parent religion Judaism, to image God in male form. Male roles are seen as representing authority and rule, initiation and power. Since God is by definition the absolute expression of these roles of initiation, power, and sovereignty, only male metaphors are appropriate for him. Female metaphors can be used only for what is ruled over, created by, or acted upon by God; they cannot signify what acts, rules, or has autonomous power.

This gender dualism of God and creation as male and female is evident in biblical as well as Christian symbolism. Although female theological metaphors are not absent from the Bible and Christian cult and theology, these primarily either symbolize creaturely subordination to God or else point to evil or negative traits that separate the human from God. Christian symbolism of the female thus splits into two forms, the good feminine and the bad female. The good feminine represents creaturely existence totally submissive to divine initiative, self-abnegating of any pride or activity of its own. Typically, this is also expressed as “purity” or suppression of sexuality. The Virgin Mary represents the apogee of this ideal. The feminine is also used in both Judaism and Christianity to image the elect people in relationship to God. The covenant relationship to God is imaged along the lines of a patriarchal marriage, with Israel or the church as bride in relation to the bridegroom.

Influenced by ascetic spirituality, Christianity emphasizes the virginal character of the church not only in her espousal to her Lord, but also in her birthing of the people of God. Christian baptism is imaged as a new birth that transforms and negates the sinfulness of birth through the female. Actual birth destroys virginity and brings forth sinful offspring, while through baptism the church remains virginal and brings forth virginal offspring. This baptism symbolism illustrates another typical trait of androcentric patriarchal religion: the extent to which its symbols and rituals duplicate female biological and social roles—conception, birth, suckling, feeding—but in such a way as to negate these roles in their female form, while elevating them to a higher spiritual plane through the male cultic monopoly on these activities.

Female symbolism in Christianity also symbolizes the soul and its passive reception of divine initiative, as well as creation itself or the earth as the object of God’s creative work. In Proverbs and the wisdom tradition feminine roles are in the same way ascribed to God. This continues in Judaism in concepts such as the divine Shekhinah, or divine pres-
ence. Some minority traditions in Christianity have also im-
age the Holy Spirit as female or revived the wisdom
tradition to speak of God as having a feminine side. But in
all versions of this notion of divine androgyny, the feminine
roles or aspects of God are thought of as secondary and aux-
iliary to a male-centered divine fatherhood. Wisdom is seen
as a secondary and dependent principle that comes forth
from the divine father to mediate his laws and actions to cre-
ation. Thus she is often pictured as resembling the family
mother who mediates the commands of the father to the
children. Thus even these minor instances of feminine imag-
ery for God do not fundamentally break out of the androcent-
tric patriarchal symbol that allows the “good feminine”
to image only that which is secondary and auxiliary to a
male-centered ultimacy.

Female participation in Christian redemption has also
been biased by androcentric anthropology. In the ascetic tra-
ditions of Christian spirituality, the holy woman is defined
as transcending not only her bodily temptations but also her
female nature: she is said to have become “virile” and
“manly.” This peculiar formulation is found in gnosticism
(see logion 114 of the Gospel of Thomas), but also in ortho-
dox Christian asceticism (see Leander of Seville’s preface to
his Institutes on Virginity). It derives from an assumed analogy
between maleness and spirituality (or rationality), and be-
tween femaleness and corporeality or the passions. Ascetic-
ism restores the male in his spiritual manliness, but is possible
for woman only by transcending her “female weak-
ness.” This notion suggested to many early Christian women
that asceticism might be the route to female emancipation.
But the church tradition, as defined by male leadership, hast-
tened to add that the true spirituality of woman is expressed
only through the most total submission to male authority,
especially ecclesiastical authority.

In the Protestant tradition, where spirituality is reincor-
porated into a familial context, woman’s piety is seen as ex-
pressible only through submission to her husband, as well as
to church and civil authority (as long as these public authori-
ties are of the correct Christian sect). Thus, Christian re-
demption does not set woman free, but rather forgives her
for her original sin of insubordination by displaying her as
voluntarily submissive to male authority.

Nevertheless, Christian androcentrism remains deeply
suspicous that all women, even holy women, conceal ten-
dencies to insubordination. When these tendencies come out
in the open and are asserted unrepentantly, woman becomes
witch or handmaid of the devil. When she is crushed or sup-
pressed, as she should be, woman—even if holy—remains
Eve, the punished woman put back in her place. Thus Mary,
image of the ideal woman as totally submissive and purged
of any sexual or willful traits, in effect remains an unattain-
able ideal for real women, an ideal by which all women are
judged and found lacking.

All the androcentric presuppositions discussed come to-
gether in the exclusion of woman from ecclesiastical leader-
ship as priest, teacher, or minister. The identification of male
authority and divine authority excludes women from being
able to represent God or speak as the voice of God. As a per-
son who cannot act autonomously or as an authority in her
own right, she cannot exercise such authority in human soci-
ety generally, much less in the church, the restored human
society. As one deficient in moral self-control and rationality,
she is incapable of teaching and of spiritual government.

Despite these pervasive androcentric assumptions of
Christian theology, Christianity, as practiced, has been much
more ambivalent. Androcentrism has partially shaped the
practice of biblical and Christian religion, in the sense of ac-
tual exclusion of women from leadership and the indoctrina-
ion of an androcentric piety accepted as normative by
women as well as men. But there have also been many in-
stances of female religious power that are by no means con-
tained by these definitions: prophetesses in both Old and
New Testaments; female teachers, apostles, and local leaders
in the New Testament; and holy women, healers, charismat-
ics, and mystics who were by no means as submissive to male
authority as these theories demand. Learned Christian
women have studied scripture, founded religious orders and
movements that they led in their own name, and written reli-
gious treatises of all kinds to express their religious experience
and teachings. Yet, the evidence for this alternative history
has only begun to be discovered in recent times, as the pre-
suppositions of androcentrism itself are challenged by female
religious scholars.

The final expression of androcentrism lies in its com-
mand of the transmission of tradition. Tradition is continu-
ually rewritten to conform to androcentric presuppositions.
Alternative realities are erased from memory, or they are pre-
served in such a way as to deny them public authority. Reli-
giously powerful women are defined in the tradition in such
a way as to make them conform to male definitions of sub-
mission or else to be remembered in pejorative ways that
allow this memory to function only as a caveat against female
religious leadership. Thus, in the Revelation to John, a female
prophet who is the leader of a community rivaling those of
the prophet John is termed “Jezebel,” the name by which
Old Testament androcentrism rejected a queen who wor-
shiped other gods. As long as it is impossible to imagine that
Jezebel’s gods might have been expressions of the divine as
authentic as those of Elijah (or that the Jezebel of the Re-
velation to John was as authentic a prophet as John), androcentric
readings of the Judeo-Christian tradition remain intact.

SEE ALSO God, article on God in Postbiblical Christianity; Women’s Studies.

BIBLIOGRAPHY
ANDROGYNES. The androgyne (from the Greek andros, "man," and gune, "woman") is a creature that is half male and half female. In mythology, such a creature is usually a god and is sometimes called a hermaphrodite, after Hermaphroditus, son of Hermes and Aphrodite, who is said to have grown together with the nymph Salmacis (Ovid, Metamorphoses 4.347–388). In religious parlance, androgyne is a much more comprehensive and abstract concept than is implied by the literal image of a creature simultaneously male and female in physical form. To say that God is androgynous is very different from saying that God is an androgyne. But if we limit ourselves to the relatively narrow interpretation of the bisexual god, usually a creator, we are still dealing with a very broad and important religious concept.

It is often said that androgyne are universal, or even archetypal. This is not true. It has been demonstrated that the androgyne is confined in its distribution either to areas formerly of the early “high civilizations” or to areas affected by influences from these centers. Nevertheless, this distribution does extend over a very wide area indeed, testifying to the great appeal of the image. The myth of the splitting apart of a bisexual creator is implicit in the Hebrew myth told in Genesis and is explicit in related texts from ancient Mesopotamia; it appears throughout the ancient Indo-European world and in the myths of Australian Aborigines, African tribes, North American and South American Indians, and Pacific islanders; and it is an important theme in medieval and Romanic European literature. Yet many religions, particularly “primitive religions,” have managed to survive without it, and it has very different meanings for many of the cultures in which it does appear. (See Baumann, 1955, p. 9; Kluckhohn, 1960, p. 52; Campbell, 1983, map on p. 142.)

One might attempt to construct a taxonomy of androgyne in various ways. Beginning with the visual image, androgyne may be horizontal (with breasts above and a phallus below) or, more often, vertical (with one side, usually the left, bearing a breast and half of a vagina and the other side bearing half of a phallus). One may also distinguish “good” and “bad” androgyne in two different senses: morally acceptable and symbolically successful. In the first sense, it must be noted that although androgyne are popularly supposed to stand for a kind of equality and balance between the sexes, since they are technically half male and half female, they more often represent a desirable or undesirable distortion of the male-female relationship or a tension based on an unequal distribution of power. Thus in some societies, divine or ritual androgyne play positive social roles, affirming culturally acceptable values, while others are despised as symbols of an undesirable blurring of categories.

In the second sense, androgyne may be regarded as “good,” in the sense of symbolically successful, when the image presents a convincing fusion of the two polarities and as “bad” when the graft fails to “take” visually or philosophically—that is, when it is a mere juxtaposition of opposites rather than a true fusion. “Bad” androgyne often turn out, on closer inspection, to be not true androgyne but pseudo-androgyne, creatures with some sort of equivocal or ambiguous sexuality that disqualifies them from inclusion in the ranks of the straightforwardly male or female. These liminal figures include the eunuch, the transvestite (or sexual masquerader), the figure who undergoes a sex change or exchanges his sex with that of a person of the opposite sex, the pregnant male, the alternating androgyne (queen for a day, king for a day), and male-female twins.

Perhaps the most important way in which androgyne may be split into two groups, as it were, is in terms of their way of coming into existence. Some are the result of the fusing of separates, male and female; others are born in a fused form and subsequently split into a male and a female. In orthodox mythologies of creation, chaos is negative, something that must be transcended before life can begin; distinctions must therefore be made—male distinguished from female, one social class from another. This corresponds to the Freudian belief that the desire to return to undifferentiated chaos, to return to the womb or the oceanic feeling, is a wish for death, for Thanatos (though it has been demonstrated that this is a facile and incorrect interpretation of the wish to return to chaos; see Eliade, 1965, p. 119). In the mythology of mysticism, however, chaos is positive; the desire to merge back into chaos is the goal of human existence, the supreme integration toward which one strives. In many rituals, too, androgyne is “a symbolic restoration of ‘Chaos,” of the undifferentiated unity that preceded the Creation, and this return to the homogeneous takes the form of a supreme regeneration, a prodigious increase of power” (ibid., pp. 114, 199, 122). The mystic striving toward positive chaos is a clear parallel to the Jungian integration of the individual, for it celebrates the merging of two apparently separate entities (the self and God) that are in fact one. Thus, fusing androgyne