

Abstract:

This study connects two powerful systems—religion and the prison system through the lens of gender inequality to explain how these systems reflect and reproduce social inequalities, particularly for women and marginalized communities. Religion means different things to different people, and it plays a powerful role in shaping beliefs, values, social norms, and even political systems. While it can foster identity and unity, it has also been used to control, govern, and divide.

How Religion, Race & Gender Intersect

Feminist Theory:

Simone de Beauvoir argued that women are treated as “**the Other**” - defined only in relation to men. Patriarchal systems, including religion, restrict women’s autonomy, especially over their bodies and roles in society.

Kimberlé Crenshaw expanded this idea through **intersectionality**, showing how race, gender, class, and more **intersect** to shape oppression. **Black & Indigenous women** are not just “Othered” as women - but also as racialized people in a white, colonial society.

Conflict Theory:

According to **Karl Marx**, religion is the “**opium of the people**” — used to pacify the oppressed and maintain the status quo. **Euro-Christian** values erased Indigenous spirituality and upheld colonial rule. **Church and state** worked together to control populations through ideology. **Residential schools** were tools of assimilation, backed by law (Indian Act 1876, Davin Report 1879), masking violence as morality.



Criminalization of Black & Indigenous Women:

- Women who didn’t fit Euro-Christian ideals—modesty, obedience, motherhood—were seen as immoral.
- Religion helped justify over-policing, harsh sentencing, and stereotypes (e.g. “aggressive” Black women).
- Systems built for white men ignore women’s realities - like trauma, reproductive health, and caregiving roles.
- In prison, racialized women carry a **double stigma**: criminalized for surviving and marginalized for not fitting idealized gender norms.



Reproductive Control in Prison

- Provincial jails limit access to abortion: poor hygiene, constant surveillance, stigma, and outdated policies.
- Religion fuels abortion stigma, criminalizing choices of Black, Indigenous & poor women.
- Result: Abortion becomes a tool of moral and social control, not just a healthcare issue.

What Can be Improved?

•Education:

- Teach Black, Indigenous & feminist perspectives
- Include colonialism, racism & reproductive justice
- Provide trauma-informed, culturally relevant programs
- Train staff to address bias & systemic oppression

•Policing & Courts:

- Hold police accountable for racial targeting
- Fund community-led crisis response
- Ensure fair legal support for all women
- Use restorative justice over jail for nonviolent acts

•Prisons & Reintegration:

- Center healing, not punishment
- Support families & post-release care (housing, jobs, mental health)
- End solitary confinement, especially for vulnerable women

Conclusion

In Canada, religion, law, and colonial power have worked together to control and erase Indigenous and Black women. From residential schools to prisons, Euro-Christian values have shaped systems that punish survival and resistance—especially for those who defy gender and racial norms. These systems aren’t broken—they were built to maintain inequality. Real justice means dismantling oppressive structures through inclusive education, community care, and Indigenous-led healing. Until we move from punishment to care, the cycles of trauma and incarceration will continue.

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