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Women Transforming Faith
7 Spiritual Revolutionaries
In Photos: Aung San Suu Kyi's Release
Rwanda's Revival

SEVEN SPIRITUAL LEADERS

As women step into leadership roles in spiritual communities across the globe, they're making huge waves in the areas of peace, equality, and interfaith dialogue. But more often than not, their messages are comfortingly simple. These spiritual heroines are just a handful of the powerful women who are guiding us to a better world.

1



The Renegade Nun

Joan Chittister

“If the people will lead, eventually the leaders will follow.”

ABOUT JOAN CHITTISTER

Sister Joan Chittister is one of the most outspoken advocates for women's ordination and leadership in the Catholic Church and one of the Church's most ardent leaders of social justice causes. A prioress for Benedictine Sisters of Erie, Pennsylvania for 12 years, Chittister's incorporation of feminism, ecology, human rights, and peace into her theology has drawn criticism from some quarters—including the Vatican. With an undaunted commitment to her causes, she has weathered controversy and brushed off attempts to silence her. And she has created a community around an intrepid vision. When Vatican officials forbade Chittister from attending a conference on women's ordination, her Benedictine Sisters of Erie stood behind her to support her decision. Today, she is a sought-after Christian guide and independent voice of conscience.

SPEAKING FOR THE SILENCED

Chittister advocates on behalf of those who have been silenced within religion and society. Until religious and political institutions change, she continues to appeal directly to the hearts and minds of individuals. She has authored over 40 books and has penned a bi-weekly column in the *National Catholic Reporter* since 2003. As a public voice, she leads global religious reflections on current events. And she participates widely in interfaith initiatives, contributing to an evolving vision of a world where people of all religions and backgrounds stand together as equals. In place of a God of divisions and hierarchies, Joan Chittister has devoted her life to an understanding of a God that brings people together.

benetvision.org

2



The Hugging Mother Amma

“ We are all beads strung together on the same thread of love. To awaken this unity—and to spread to others the love that is our inherent nature—is the true goal of human life. ”

ABOUT AMMA

Can a hug change the world? How about 30 million of them? That is the number of embraces Amma is said to have given her followers, who line up wherever she goes to experience the warmth of her loving embrace. Mata Amritanandamayi, an Indian spiritual leader widely known as “Amma,” meaning “mother,” found her spiritual calling at a young age. She was enthralled by her Hindu religion and, to the chagrin of her family, she began attracting spiritual seekers to the family home as a teenager. Amma’s hugs are part of her spiritual practice, which views love as the root of action, and physical embrace as a basic expression of human love from which we nurture compassion for the world. Along with her famous embraces, Amma’s joyful laughter and original renditions of devotional songs have inspired millions.

LOVE IN ACTION

Amma teaches that expressions of love naturally lead to actions that will end humanity’s suffering. Her loving vision for the world led her to create hospitals, educational institutes, temples, environmental projects, as well as multiple programs for social welfare. She has also inspired hundreds of her followers to create similar programs, including food and clothing banks, disaster relief efforts, medical camps, and orphanages.

amma.org

3



The Visionary Elders International Council of Thirteen Indigenous Grandmothers

“ Women united in close circles can awaken the wisdom in each other’s hearts. ”

ABOUT THE GRANDMOTHERS

Dedicated to reviving ancient ways and wisdom to heal a planet out of balance, the International Council of Thirteen Indigenous Grandmothers is a unique alliance of spiritual leaders hailing from the US, Gabon, Nepal, Brazil, Nicaragua, Mexico, and Tibet. The grandmothers came together for the first time in 2004, joining forces for “prayer, education, and healing for our Mother Earth, all her inhabitants, all the children, and for the next seven generations to come.” They view the council as the fulfillment of a prophecy that will usher in a new world. They live out this calling by visiting each other’s communities, one at a time, forming a prayer circle around the globe.

THE NEXT GENERATION

The grandmothers come together at these gatherings to pray and transmit wisdom to future generations, and their work holds a special focus on children and education. The members of the council draw on their sacred roles as grandmothers, their combined 900 years of life experience, and their position as bearers of ancient teachings to apply old solutions to new struggles against modern warfare, environmental destruction, and greed. With their grandchildren and great-grandchildren always in mind, the grandmothers are lighting a path towards a better future.

grandmotherscouncil.org

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The Voice of Unity Daisy Khan

“ We are all different rivers leading into the same ocean, and the ocean represents God Almighty. ”

ABOUT DAISY KHAN

After 9/11, the US public and international community were quick to define Islam and its adherents. Suddenly, architectural designer Daisy Khan found herself a spokesperson for her religion, pressured to answer for women shot in soccer fields, whose noses and ears were cut off, girls forced to marry middle-aged men—all in the name of Islam. She was compelled to act and founded WISE—the Women’s Islamic Initiative in Spirituality and Equality—a social justice movement led by Muslim women. And later she became the executive director of the American Association for Muslim Advancement. Both organizations bring people together to strengthen peaceful and moderate Islamic movements. Her movement is connecting Muslims within and across borders, giving them the tools to empower themselves, counter extremism, and strengthen their identity as a peaceful and tolerant religion.

LAYING FOUNDATIONS FOR PEACE

Perhaps drawing from her architectural background, Daisy Khan has demonstrated that strong structures come from a strong foundation. Khan reports successful shifts in thinking, like a WISE program that trains imams in women’s rights. One Afghan imam who went through the program refused to marry a 13-year-old girl against her will. He used the occasion to give a passionate sermon against forced marriages. Khan was involved in the planning of the much maligned Park51 Islamic Center near Ground Zero, and was caught off guard by the fervor of backlash against its proposal last year. Not deterred, she took the opportunity to engage with the wider community, and continues to take difficult subjects head on, build community, and cheer on alliances across faiths.

asmasociety.org

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© Linda Ward

The Global Healer Cynthia Jurs

“ It is our collective awakening that is going to bring us into a new era of enlightened activity. ”

ABOUT CYNTHIA JURTS

In 1990, a 106-year-old lama in Nepal gave Cynthia Jurs a mission that would become her life’s work: Journey to sites of great need and bury earth treasure vases consecrated by Buddhist monks and filled with prayers and healing offerings. Twenty years into this mission, Cynthia Jurs and her organization, the Earth Treasure Vase Global Healing Project, continue to bury vases around the world. In each site they form communities of intention for a harmonious and balanced future, transform prayers into real world alliances for peace, and inspire action with the message that each person is her own treasure vase filled with gifts and offerings for the planet’s healing.

ACUPUNCTURE FOR THE PLANET

Twenty-three of the original 30 vases have been buried in sites across the world. Jurs and her organization have sent them out in every direction, from Hiroshima to Arctic Alaska, to the tops of mountains and to the sources of the Amazon and Ganges rivers. In Papua New Guinea the planetary Coral Reef Foundation along with pilgrims from the Global Healing Project even buried a vase at the bottom of the ocean. “Each location is like an acupuncture point on the body of the Earth,” she says, “and each vase is like a needle bringing balance and healing.” In 2009, they buried a vase in Liberia, a country recovering from 14 years of civil war. The local community came together in a ceremony to call on their ancestors for guidance. Some 500 locals came together to bury the vase at the base of a kola tree in one of the regions most scarred by fighting. One ex-combatant turned peacebuilder has been so inspired by the practice that he has begun to study meditation. While the ritual is rooted in a specific Buddhist practice, it has grown into an international and interfaith prayer for global healing.

earthtreasurevase.org

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The Equality Defender
Zainah Anwar

“ I believe in a God that is kind, just, and compassionate. Anything done in the name of Islam must be just and compassionate. ”

ABOUT ZAINAH ANWAR

Zainah Anwar became an accidental religious scholar when Malaysia’s political and legal interpretations of Islam contradicted the compassionate religion she grew up with. She was raised as part of her country’s Muslim majority amongst Buddhists, Christians, and Hindus, in a family that embraced Malaysia’s ethnic and religious plurality. She became outraged as she watched women with a claim to equal rights under Malaysia’s constitution fall subject to Syariah (Islamic) laws that made them powerless in family law cases. In 1988, Anwar joined other Muslim feminists to create a coalition, Sisters in Islam, which she led for over 20 years.

FEMINIST SYARIAH

Sisters in Islam argues that the Syariah laws women are subjected to in Malaysia and other Muslim countries are not God’s laws, but laws created by men in power who interpreted the Koran to serve themselves. Sisters in Islam’s solution? Push legal reform and educate the public. But not everyone is happy with what they are doing. “When we protest, they shut us up, saying we have no authority to speak about Islam,” wrote Anwar in an *International Herald Tribune* column. One group even took Sisters in Islam to court challenging their right to use “Islam” in their name. Other authorities, both religious and secular, have started to pay attention to their message. Sisters in Islam has passed amendments to Malaysia’s Islamic family law, and they’ve even drafted their own version of the code that promotes equality. As they continue to lobby the government, Zainah Anwar and Sisters in Islam provide a powerful platform for Muslim women to enter the public sphere and to draw on their beliefs to create a just and democratic society.

sistersinislam.org.my

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The Bridge Builder
Venerable Mae-Chee Sansanee Sthirasuta

“ If a woman develops herself spiritually, she will possess the energy to move the universe. ”

ABOUT MAE-CHEE SANSANEE STHIRASUTA

Runway model to Buddhist nun might not be an obvious career path, but at the age of 27, Thailand’s Mae-Chee Sansanee Sthirasuta swapped her designer duds for white monastic robes and dedicated her life to spiritual awakening. Her path to enlightenment has modeled spiritual leadership roles for Buddhist women and put her on the forefront of global peace and interfaith initiatives. Mae-Chee Sansanee is the founder of the Sathira-Dhammasathan Center, a women’s meditation center and place of learning in Bangkok. She is also a co-chair of the Global Peace Initiative of Women, an alliance of women spiritual leaders working to create unity among religions and peoples around the world.

NURTURING NONVIOLENCE

Through the Dhamma center, Mae-Chee Sansanee Sthirasuta has created a sanctuary for inner and outer peace. Her teachings in nonviolence aim to awaken human potential for peaceful coexistence, and her center has become a refuge for young mothers and girls escaping prostitution. Mae-Chee is part of a growing movement that acknowledges the primacy of peace and nonviolence within all religions. Through the Global Peace Initiative of Women, Mae-Chee Sansanee Sthirasuta works to bring nonviolence principles into the wider world with coordinated, women-led, interfaith cooperation.

sathira-dhammasathan.org

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THIRTEEN TRIBAL ELDERS.

EIGHT DIFFERENT COUNTRIES.

ONE MESSAGE OF HOPE.



“FIRST WE PRAY, THEN WE TAKE ACTION.”

Follow an intrepid group of indigenous grandmothers as they travel the globe with a message of peace and unity. As fearless as they are wise, these unflappable women seek audiences with some of the most powerful spiritual leaders in the world, from the Dalai Lama to the Pope.

Narrated by Ashley Judd, the award-winning film *For the Next 7 Generations* weaves a beautiful tapestry of tribal traditions and hope for the future.

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