

## Studying gender and religion:

# A look back and a look forward

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*Are gender and religion two separate areas of study? Feminist approaches argue that the intersection of gender and religion with other categories will transform scholarship and religious understandings in ways that will go beyond where we are now. But how?*

The world's religions have been (and continue to be) extremely varied in their concepts of and approaches to the supernatural and divine, but all of them are gendered, that is, they have created and maintained differences between what it means to be male and female. Conversely, religious ideas are influenced by gender structures arising from other parts of the culture, such as the family or the state. Religious traditions have been used both to strengthen and to question existing gender structures, providing ideas about hierarchy as well as complementarity and equality. Though religious leaders have attempted to create and enforce uniformity through specific religious texts, patterns of worship, clerical personnel, court systems, and alliances with political leaders, individuals have often chosen to interpret supernatural instructions and divine will regarding gender differently, creating variety not only among religions but within them. Because ideas about gender and religious be-

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liefs are very often at the heart of people's systems of values, such variety has created tremendous conflicts, and continues to do so in many parts of the world today. Issues of gender raise philosophical, ethical, doctrinal and practical questions in all the world's religions, past and present.

This essay is a modified version of a paper given at the conference "Gender and Religion in the 21<sup>st</sup> century". It builds on critical gender perspectives that have transformed many fields, including the study of religion, in the last thirty years. Within this context, I would like to look backward and sideways, to see where we have been in the gendered scholarship of religion, and where, in my opinion, we are now. To do this, I will first make some general remarks about why the intersection of gender and religion is so important, then look at some of the ways in which feminist scholarship has re-interpreted religious texts and histories, and then examine the impact of this re-interpretation on contemporary religious practice and scholarship.

The impact and relevance of gender for the study of religions can be summarized in the following ways:

*1. Without using gender as an analytical category, religion can no longer be fully described or analyzed.*

Scholars exploring the gendered aspects of religion have brought an enormous amount of new information to light, and have posed new questions for established religious authorities. These questions often challenge traditional religious practices and also challenge research on religion as a field of scholarship. Thus work in this area is often very contentious, and still provokes a range of negative responses, from trivialization to institutional opposition. Despite such responses, however – and perhaps also *because* of the vehemence of these responses – the study of religions is growing steadily more gendered. Scholarship that does not include what Randi Warne has

called a "gender-critical turn" (Warne 2000) and Elizabeth Clark a "paradigm-shift" (Clarke 2001) is simply not complete, for religion and gender are embedded within one another.

*2. Gender issues permeate religion in very complicated ways, manifesting themselves in ways that are both local and universal.*

Religions provide myths, symbols, and narratives that express desires for transcendence, redemption, salvation, liberation, and wholeness, but that also enforce inequalities, oppression, separation, and hierarchies. The relations between profoundly transformative and deeply conservative aspects of any religion play themselves out at the local level, but often with references to values that are perceived as unchanging and divinely ordained.

*3. Gender as a category of analysis in religion has similarities with other categories such as race, class, or ethnicity, but it is not exactly comparable. Other categories of analysis intersect with gender in complex ways.*

All historical and contemporary categories of analysis have distinct cultural origins, and those of class, race, and ethnicity may be easier to see in religious matters than those of gender, which often lie deeper within religious symbol-systems and language. Analysis that takes all these categories into account cannot be simply additive, however, but must evaluate the way that categories of difference interact in religious spheres of life.

*4. The full evaluation of the intersection of gender and religion will transform scholarship and religious understandings in ways that will go beyond where we are now.*

Ursula King has described the scholarly interest in women and religion, and the development of feminist theology, as first steps in a paradigm shift, but the real integration of gender and religion as a "double paradigm shift." She comments that "this is

perhaps still too tame to describe what is really happening. We are not dealing simply with a mere shift, but with a shaking of foundations, a radical remapping of our intellectual and academic landscape, and a repositioning of bodies of knowledge that relate to religion.” (King 2004, 75) This double paradigm shift has already contributed to a new men’s studies in religion that makes use of the insights and achievements of feminist scholarship. Lesbian, gay and queer studies in many fields have further contested notions of gender, including those created or reinforced by religion. Queer theory in particular has highlighted the artificial and constructed nature of all oppositional categories – men/women, homosexual/heterosexual, black/white – and called for a blurring or blending of such categories, an insight that can be very fruitful for our thinking about religious binaries, including human/divine.

## RELIGION AND FEMINIST SCHOLARSHIP

### ‘1. Wave’

The story of feminist scholarship in many areas, including religion, is often described as beginning in the 1970s as an outgrowth of the women’s rights movement – what is now termed ‘second-wave’ feminism. This is true to a great extent, but it overlooks the fact that the first women’s rights movement of the nineteenth century also led women to study, analyze, critique, and attempt to reform the world’s religions. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, for example, not only worked for women’s equality in political, legal, and economic matters, but also wrote commentary on the foundational text of Christianity, the Bible. In *The Woman’s Bible*, written in 1895-98, Stanton and several others provided a critique of the patriarchal texts of the Bible and highlighted those verses, chapters, and stories that showed women in a positive light. Other women, such as Hannah Adams, Lydia

Maria Child, Jane Ellen Harrison, and Evelyn Underhill, wrote on world religions, though they mostly held no official teaching positions nor did they necessarily address the question of women in religions. However, the scholarly contributions of these women pioneers have not yet received the acknowledgement they deserve nor have they found their due place yet in the historiography of religious studies, so that much remains to be done to make past women scholars of religion more visible by retrieving their work. No doubt there are Scandinavian counterparts of these American and English women whose work also needs to be explored and analyzed more fully.

### ‘2. Wave’

The second wave of the women’s movement built on these earlier foundations even when it did not acknowledge them explicitly. In the 1950s and 1960s, theological faculties in many Christian denominations lifted their bans on female students – Harvard Divinity School, for example, started admitting women students in 1955 – and a few women began to obtain official theological training. Like women in higher education in all fields during the 1960s, these pioneers in divinity schools became involved with feminism. The women students of Harvard Divinity School founded a Women’s Caucus in 1970. This laid the foundation for a regular “Women’s Studies in Religion” programme, which began in 1973, and continues now more than thirty years later to give women scholars interested in religion opportunities for research, reflection, and writing. The American Academy of Religion Annual Meeting, the largest gathering of religion scholars in the world, included from 1974 onwards a regular section on “Women and Religion.” The International Association for the History of Religions (IAHR), which meets every five years, took longer to recognize the growth of feminist theology and the

study of women and religion, but it did include a few panels beginning in 1980. In 1986, women scholars from all over Europe founded the European Society of Women in Theological Research (ESWTR), which holds bi-annual, multi-lingual conferences in different European countries presenting research in theology and religious studies.

Published scholarship kept pace with these changes in the enrollment patterns of theological faculties and the topics of scholarly conferences. Studies focusing on feminist theology and women's actions in Christianity and Judaism, such as Mary Daly's *Beyond God the Father* and Rosemary Radford Ruether's *Religion and Sexism: Images of Women in Jewish and Christian Tradition*, began appearing in the early 1970s. The new journals in women's studies that began publication in the 1970s regularly included articles on religion, particularly on Christian history. In its first volume (1976), *Signs* included an article by James Brundage, "Prostitution in Medieval Canon Law," and in its third volume (1975) *Feminist Studies* contained an article by JoAnn McNamara, "Sexual Equality and the Cult of Virginity in Early Christian Thought." The *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, which includes theology, critical assessments, historical studies, and discussions of contemporary issues, began publication in 1985, and shortly afterward Arvind Sharma began editing a series of collections on women in many religious traditions. Feminist analysis of the sacred texts and historical development of world religions other than Christianity and Judaism have been somewhat slower in coming, but Rita Gross' *Buddhism After Patriarchy* and Leila Ahmed's *Women and Gender in Islam* now provide a solid base. Serenity Young's anthology, *Sacred Writings By and About Women* brings together excerpts from a wide range of primary texts from the world's religions, taken from sacred scriptures, law books, creation myths,

hagiographies, folklore and tribal narratives. It allows scholars – and students – to compare images of women not only in the world's major text-based religions, but also in the more localized indigenous traditions of Australia, Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Americas. Another fine source book that highlights women's own writings is Shawn Madigan, *Mystics, Visionaries and Prophets: A Historical Anthology of Women's Spiritual Writings*.

### THE DOUBLE PARADIGM SHIFT

King's double paradigm shift – first to women, then to gender – emerged in scholarship on religion in the late 1980s, the same time that it did in scholarship in other academic fields, with articles such as Lyndal Roper's "The Common Man, 'The Common Good,' 'Common Women': Reflections on Gender and Meaning in the Reformation German Commune," and books such as Clarissa Atkinson, Constance Buchanan, and Margaret Miles' *Shaping New Vision: Gender and Values in American Culture*. Religion has also been an important part of the new scholarship on sexuality and masculinity. The very first article in the first issue of *Journal of the History of Sexuality* (1990) was on a religious topic – Ruth Karras' "Holy Harlots: Prostitute Saints in Medieval Legend" – and the new men's studies journals (*Journal of Men's Studies, Men and Masculinities*) that began publication in the 1990s also had articles on religious issues, such as Kenneth Cuthbertson's "Coming Out/Conversion: An Exploration of Gay Religious Experience." (*Journal of Men's Studies* 4).

At the same time that feminist theology and religious studies were broadening to include a focus on gender and sexuality, they were also criticised – as was feminism in general – of privileging the experience of western, white, middle-class women. Scholars from what was usually in the 1980s called the "Third World" developed cri-

tiques of the role of religion, and of Euro-North-American women, in the creation and maintenance of colonialism and imperi-

alism in both the past and present. Drawing on liberation theology and post-colonial theory, they developed a wide range of

feminist, Womanist (a movement which developed among Black women in North America, the Caribbean and Africa), and

other gender-conscious theologies. Orbis Books has been particularly important in making this theology available to scholars

and students, often in collections such as Virginia Fabella and Mercy Oduyoye's *With Passion and Compassion: Third World Women Doing Theology*, Ursula King's *Feminist Theology from the Third World*, and Chung Hyun Kyung's *Struggle to be the Sun Again: Introducing Asian Women's Theology*.

#### THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN RELIGION

All of this scholarship is beginning to allow scholars to identify some patterns in gender and religion and make a few systematic comparisons, though these must be done very carefully, and do not obviate the need for more basic research. One pattern that has emerged is that women generally hold higher positions in traditional, tribal, and animist religions than in text-based religions that have developed hierarchical institutions. Traditional religions generally center on spirits that link the natural and supernatural worlds. The power to communicate with and influence the spirits is generally regarded as a natural gift rather than something obtained through formal education or a position in a hierarchy, so that women as well as men in many cultures acted (and continue to act) as spirit mediums, shamans, healers, or other types of religious specialists. Often their powers were related to gender-specific areas of life, such as menstruation, childbirth, coming of age in men and women, or certain work activities, but some shamans were so powerful that they transcended gender roles and could influence the entire spirit world. In *Priestess, Mother, Sacred Sister: Religions Dominated By Women*, Susan Starr Sered provides a fascinating study of twelve religions currently being practiced that are dominated by women, some of which are over a thousand years old.

Historical studies have also shown that women often play a leading role during the formative period of a religion, or are closely associated with the work of a religious

founder, but later they are relegated to the background and lose much of their independent agency. The official histories of the religion often downplay or ignore women's early prominence, which has only been uncovered during the last several decades of feminist research. Scholars such as Elizabeth Clark, JoAnn McNamara, and Kari Børreson, for example, have focused on the words and actions of women in early Christianity, while Diana Paul and Miranda Shaw have looked at women in Mahayana and Tibetan Buddhism. The same pattern emerges in new movements within religions, such as the Protestant Reformation or nineteenth-century Christian missionary movements. The neglect of women's actions also means that feminist scholars have developed what Barbara Newman (1995) has called a "hermeneutics of suspicion" toward all previous scholarship, noting the ways in which it has often been distorted by "lenses of gender" which have rewritten the story to fit with later, more androcentric, models.

Given these two points of similarity, it is not surprising that in many of the world's text-based religions, the dominant image of God, especially in discourse that emphasizes God's transcendence, is masculine. That transcendent masculine God is sometimes accompanied by a more immanent feminine Spirit, but more often by a hostile or ambivalent attitude toward the body, in which asceticism and monasticism are prized. Though monasticism and asceticism provided opportunities for extraordinary 'women of spirit' to demonstrate what Eleanore McLaughlin (1979) has called "power out of holiness," they have more often led to deeply misogynist views. Such 'women of spirit', can be found in most of the world's religions; they sometimes gain official approval and are raised to the level of saint, but their leadership is generally personal rather than institutionalized. The institutional hierarchies that developed in the world's text-based religions have all

been male-dominated, a structure understood to reflect the pattern of domination in the sacred hierarchy. This gender asymmetry is rejected by many contemporary people, but comforting and fully supported by others.

### RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS AND GENDER HIERARCHIES

The last thirty years of scholarship have made it clear that every religious tradition has ideas about proper gender relations and the relative value of the devotion and worship of male and female adherents; every one stipulates or suggests rules for the way men and women are to act. In many, however, these messages are contradictory and ambiguous, with adherents often able to find support for their own views within them. Thus in the contemporary world most religions have a fundamentalist wing, advocating stronger gender distinctions and hierarchy, and a more liberal wing, advocating greater gender egalitarianism. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, fundamentalism is more politically and socially powerful within Christianity, Hinduism, and Islam, but the gender implications of this fundamentalism also evoke strong criticism, and more liberal adherents of these faiths search their texts and traditions for less restrictive messages.

Many individuals and groups are working within religious traditions to develop new gender-inclusive liturgies, rituals, prayers, and texts, and to promote institutional changes that will give women greater access to official positions. Others, including many feminists, have rejected the existing text-based religions as fundamentally oppressive, and have instead searched for or created more female-centered religious language and images. Images of the goddess from the ancient Mediterranean and Europe have provided some images for this new – to use Naomi Goldenburg’s phrase – “thealogy,” and the many goddesses of

Hinduism also provide symbolic resources. The goddess spirituality movement has also developed new symbols, rituals, and liturgies linked to the creative power of women’s bodies and to the earth, bringing together feminism and ecological concerns. This ‘spiritual feminism’ or ‘women’s spirituality’ is gaining increasing numbers of adherents, though primarily in western Europe and North America.

In addition to goddess worship, within the last several decades people who view most text-based religions as hopelessly patriarchal have created more gender-egalitarian forms of spirituality. They have drawn eclectically from a number of sources – Native American and African religions, the pagan deities of Europe (especially the Great Goddess), non-diabolic witchcraft, psychological theory – to create new types of rituals and organizations, often labeled ‘neo-pagan’ or ‘New Age’. Some of these groups are explicitly feminist or Womanist, interpreting ambiguous feminine imagery from many traditions in ways that empower women, and many emphasize environmentalism and on-going revelation or communication with the dead.

Many adherents of ‘new-age’ spirituality advocate withdrawal from politics or other worldly concerns, but sometimes animist or shamanist beliefs can have political implications. Heike Behrend has studied Alice Lakwena, a religious leader called the Messiah by her followers, who raised an army in 1987 called the “Holy Spirit Mobile Forces” which opposed the National Resistance Army of Uganda armed mainly with charms of snake bone, beeswax, and shea nut oil provided by Lakwena. They believed these charms would turn into weapons or provide protection against bullets, following a long line of groups in many religious traditions that have regarded spiritual armor as more important than physical. Because her followers saw her as divinely inspired, the fact that Lakwena was a woman did not affect their loyalty to her;



people's responses to her were much like those to Joan of Arc. Like Joan, Lakwena was charged with witchcraft, but her story provides an example of the complexities of gender in the contemporary religious scene, and the novel ways in which religion and gender intersect in new religious movements and groups.

### THE PROMISE OF GENDER STUDIES IN RELIGION?

It is clear that the "double-paradigm shift" – first to women and then to gender – is exciting for those of us involved in it, and that it has had a great impact on both scholarship and religious practice. The impact of all this discussion about gender on the development of main/malestream theology – and here I would say especially Christian theology, which continues to dominate the field of religious studies – is less noticeable than one might expect or hope, however. Randi Warne (2000) points out that although gender-critical studies of religion have become increasingly available, they remain a kind of "expertise of the margins". Liz Clark (2001) comments that "the hoped-for 'paradigm shift'" has had "less than overwhelming success." Though some of our older colleagues may feel the study of religion has been "corrupted by excessive preoccupation with gender studies" (a comment made last month by a reviewer of an article on the Protestant Reformation for the *Sixteenth Century Journal*, of which I am co-editor) this is not reflected in the articles themselves in major religious journals, the majority of which continue to pay no attention to women, gender, or sexuality.

Particularly in materials designed for the classroom – which more than anything else shapes how we will present religious studies to the future – we have not even gotten to the stage of "add women and stir" in many cases. Speaking just of Christianity: A much-advertised and lavishly-produced

source reader in Christian history published in 2001 by Blackwells, for example, Alister McGrath's *Christian Literature: An Anthology* includes writings by only two women, Julian of Norwich and Dorothy Sayers, along with those of 89 men, including Shakespeare, Anthony Trollope, and the contemporary American author and radio host Garrison Keillor. Euan Cameron's magisterial textbook, *The European Reformation*, published in 1991 by Clarendon, gives women and the family (linked, of course) four pages out of 500. Scholars – even those at the senior level – who decide to focus on women are criticized for ignoring more significant work. Elsie McKee, for example, a professor of church history and theology at Princeton Seminary, told me she was both teased and reproved for spending time producing her wonderful edition and biography of Katharina Schütz Zell, a lay Protestant reformer in Strasbourg, instead of more 'important' editions of Calvin.

There now exists a two-tier system in the academic study of religion, with mainstream scholarship remaining dominantly male and feminist scholarship existing at the margins, but so far unsuccessful in decentering the androcentrism of mainstream tradition. This two-tier system is also evident in scholarly conferences – while the International Association of the History of Religion has had a few sessions on women's and gender issues since the 1980s, women scholars continue to give only about 10 percent of the papers, not up much from the IAHR's very first meeting in 1908, when women gave 6 percent of the papers. This is at a time when the student bodies at many seminaries in the United States are now more than 50 percent female, so that it is not for want of available female scholars. Such statistics combined with the resurgence of anti-female ideas and practices in religious fundamentalisms around the world (Southern Baptists in the US and Hindus in northern India are especially no-

ticeable of late) can make one very depressed about the glacial pace of welcome changes and the seemingly much faster pace of dreadful ones.

I can't end on such a gloomy note, however. Conferences like the earlier mentioned are great occasions for reinvigorating ourselves as scholars (and as people) convinced that the intersection of religion and gender can be liberating and transformative as well as restricting and reactionary. Whenever I'm feeling especially depressed, I think back to the very first paper I ever gave on women's religious writings in the Reformation, a mild analysis of hymns and advice for children. The material was certainly less dramatic than the stories of midwives and prostitutes I had earlier told as a historian of women's work, but it provoked the comment, expressed with great hostility: "You're not talking about women, you're talking about what women *think!*" A research direction that proved this challenging to established notions was clearly one in which I had to continue! No doubt many of you have had similar experiences, which have worked to keep you angry enough to make sure your work gets done, and gets shared. Perhaps the fact that the pace of change in both scholarship and society seems to be so slow to those of us who have been at this a couple of decades is actually a blessing, for it will certainly continue to motivate the next generation of scholars to continue in the transformative work of bringing religion and gender together.

## NOTES

1. This paper was presented at the "Gender and Religion in the 21st Century" conference held at the University of Copenhagen in October 2004. I have modified it slightly in response to comments made by the audience, and included an amplified list of further readings, as audience members indicated that they would find this helpful. The list of readings includes only materials in English.

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## SUMMARY

*Feminist scholarship in religion began with the first wave of the women's movement in the nineteenth century, but became much more extensive with the second-wave women's*

*movement in the 1970s. This scholarship first explored women's religious experiences, and then began to investigate the relationships between gender and religion more broadly, what Ursula King has described as a 'double paradigm shift'. It is now clear that without using gender as an analytical category, religion can no longer be fully described or evaluated. Gender issues permeate religion in very complicated ways, manifesting themselves at levels from the local to the universal, and gender also intersects with other categories of analysis such as race, class, or ethnicity.*

*Gendered study of religion and feminist theology have had a great impact on both scholarship and religious practice, though less impact on the development of main/male-stream theology than one might have hoped. The full evaluation of the intersection of gender and religion will transform scholarship and religious understandings in ways that will go beyond where we are now.*

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