

## Women, Gender, and Religion

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### Charting New Territory

#### Religion and “the Gender-Critical Turn”

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#### An Introduction

Gender as an analytical category, and gendering as a social practice, are central to religion, and the naturalization of these phenomena and their subsequent under-investigation have had a deleterious effect on the adequacy of the scholarship that the scientific study of religion has produced. Until the scientific study of religion becomes intentionally gender-critical in all of its operations, it will unwittingly reproduce, reify and valorize the nineteenth c. gender-ideology which marks its origins, rendering suspect any claims to the scientific generation of reliable knowledge it seeks to make (Warne: 153).

[1] The focus of the present volume – women, gender, and religion – reflects the profound changes occurring in the academic study of religion. These are due, in part, to the second and third waves of the women’s movement, from which emerged two academic disciplines – women’s studies in the 1960s and 70s, and gender studies shortly thereafter – the findings and perspectives of which now inform the scholarship of diverse fields of inquiry. As a consequence, the study of religion is no longer focused on nor conducted solely by men, nor is it the “sacred” preserve of those trained in religious studies. Rather, scholars from across the social sciences, natural sciences, and humanities are turning their attention to the array of beliefs, behaviors, and practices that constitute “religion.”

[2] The categories, “women,” “gender,” and “religion,” mark the boundaries of a vast territory, previously uncharted but now under intense investigation. A diverse team of explorers from different “countries” and “cultures,” each outfitted with different expertise, tools, and “field glasses,” is gradually mapping this new terrain. Such work presents numerous challenges. Gender patterns are deeply embedded in cultural discourses and social institutions, including religious worlds, making them difficult to recognize and separate out from other elements. The critical gender awareness necessary for the work does not come “naturally”; rather, it requires what has been termed “a gender-critical turn” that affects a radically new way of seeing, thinking, and working (Warne). Making a “gender-critical turn” into the religion terrain proves especially challenging, due to the problem of “double-blindness”: on the one hand, most contemporary gender studies, whether in the humanities, social sciences, or natural sciences, remain extraordinarily “religion-blind,” while on the other, many studies in religion continue to be “gender-blind” (King and Beattie: 1). Unacknowledged biases can also render one partially blind – or selectively sighted. Those, for example, who construe women’s religious affiliations as a sign of false consciousness are oft unable to recognize the ways in which faith and religious practice have served as a source of encouragement and empowerment for women in particular historical and cultural contexts. Conversely, those whose experience of faith and religion predisposes them to scholarship of a more apologetic nature are apt to overlook or ignore the dark side of religious traditions and institutions. Thus scholarly biases both for and against religion can impede recognition of the complex role that religion plays in identity formation and social relations:

. . . it is in matters of gender, probably more than anywhere else, that the profound ambiguity and ambivalence of all religions becomes evident. Religions have profound myths and symbols of origin and creation; they offer narratives of redemption, healing and salvation; they encompass ‘way-out’ eschatological utopias, but also express the deepest human yearnings for wholeness and transcendence. . . . In and through all of these, religions have created and legitimated gender, enforced, oppressed, and warped it, but also subverted, transgressed, transformed, and liberated it. It is because of this complex interrelationship that the topic of religion and gender provides such a fascinating object of study (King and Beattie: 8).

Moreover, the postmodernist and post-structuralist theories that inform much contemporary scholarship have rendered even the boundary-categories themselves – women, gender, religion – unstable, troubled, and contested (Castelli and Rodman: 3-6). Getting “the lay of the land” is challenging indeed when the land underfoot appears to shift before our eyes.

[3] And yet, despite such challenges, significant inroads are being made into the territory, as scholars, equipped with a wide range of gender definitions and theories, make the “gender-critical turn”: examining the ways male-female differences are conceptualized in particular cultures; interrogating constructions, representations, and performances of masculinity and femininity in religious traditions; detecting the underlying, often hidden, gender patterns that represent the deep structures of religious life; critically analyzing the gender lenses through which Ultimate Reality is perceived (King and Beattie: 6). That the quest for new ways of understanding what it means to be a gendered human being has much to offer the quest for

greater understanding of religion is clear. And so, the vibrant research culture that has staked-out women, gender, and religion as its focus continues the challenged – and challenging – work of mapping new areas of investigation.

[4] One such area focuses squarely on women, reflecting the women’s studies agenda of “filling in the gaps” in a knowledge base from which women were largely, even at times entirely, excluded. To date, much of this work has been historical: analyzing texts and artifacts for evidence by which to recover and restore women to the religious landscape, in the process identifying the constraints with which women have contended in various eras; hence, the spate of “Women In . . . (Judaism, Islam, Christianity, Buddhism)” books that have appeared in recent decades. Others are deconstructing representations of and/or teachings about women in scriptural traditions – Hebrew Bible, New Testament, Quran, or Talmud – then offering, when feasible, alternative readings of these traditions. Still others seek to illumine women’s spiritual experience and the wisdom to which their writings give voice. These women- focused projects reflect the enduring conviction that women are worthy of study in their own right.

[5] And yet, even those whose primary interest is women in religion acknowledge that studying women in isolation from men has yet to produce the more inclusive knowledge of humanity that is our goal. Part of the problem, historians contend, is that women’s history “addressed itself to making women visible in existing frameworks” using the same old categories (Scott: 12). The gendered public-private dichotomy of the separate spheres, for example, is increasingly regarded as an insufficiently nuanced framework of historical analysis. This is especially true in the case of religious history, where it is becoming evident that women’s activity could and did occur in both private and public spheres (Morgan: 117). Thus, recent work seeks to study women within gender-critical analytic frameworks that can illumine the power dynamics operative in their interactions with men within the gender system. Indeed, it is within such a gender-critical interactive analysis of religious institutions that the resourcefulness, determination, and resiliency of women often come into view.

[6] An especially vibrant area of inquiry today is that of body and religion, which has produced an abundant literature (Coakley, Brown, Law). For scholars, the body is not simply a biological entity; it is also a social and symbolic construct, for within cultures, bodies and bodily differences mean things. Scholars are now studying the role religious discourses and practices play in ascribing meaning to bodies and bodily differences, such as those between male and female, and in regulating and constraining both individual bodies and collective social bodies. One particular focus of attention in this regard is bodies within religious rituals. How do cultural discourses about the body and the differences between male and female bodies impact religious rituals and, for example, the roles that men and women may assume? Others are examining the ways in which bodily practices – gestures (kneeling, bowing, touching), clothing (veiling, vestments), speaking (preaching, chanting, reading sacred texts, lamenting) – are gendered masculine or feminine. Recent studies of the interrelation between space, activity, and gender (Massey, Rendell) have proved useful for investigation of the way in which the distribution of ritual roles of men and women serve to gender sacred spaces in particular ways (Øklund).

[7] Analyses of the relationship between religion and that vast “body-space” designated “environment” also reflect the gender-critical turn. Among the areas currently being explored is the gendering of nature as feminine and the assumption of women’s closer relationship to nature. What are the positive and negative consequences – for women, men, and the environment – when nature is gendered as feminine? Is there a connection between the domination of nature, which is gendered feminine (Mother Nature, Mother Earth, Virgin Soil), and that of women and girls, as Ecofeminists contend? Gender-critical analyses of cosmogonic myths such as the Genesis creation narratives afford a fruitful starting-point for such inquiry.

[8] The escalation of religiously inspired violence around the globe illustrates the sobering observation, “Religion . . . has been responsible for more death and suffering than any other human activity” (Smith: 110). Recently, scholarly attention to religion and violence (see, e.g., JRS Supplement Series 2) has also taken a gender-turn as the pandemic of physical and sexual violence against women and girls raises urgent questions for scholars of religion. What role do religious traditions play in legitimizing – or challenging – violent conduct toward women and girls? And in what ways does religion shape women’s responses to the abuse they suffer? Cognizant that “Christianity has been a primary – in many women’s lives the primary – force in shaping our acceptance of abuse” (Brown and Parker: 36), numerous Christian theologians, men and women alike, are currently engaged in a critical re-examination of traditional theologies of the cross in hope of reinterpreting the mystery at the heart of Christian tradition (Reid, Crysedale); for, as one biblical scholar observes, “It matters which metaphors we adopt to make meaning of the cross, for each carries not only theological, but also social, political, cultural, and ethical implications”(Reid: 2). In short, how a Christian understands the suffering and death of Jesus and the sacrificial language of the tradition has implications for our own bodies.

[9] Originally presented at a symposium on “Women, Gender, and Religion,” sponsored by the Kripke Center at Creighton University on November 6-7, 2009, the essays in the present volume reflect the “gender-critical turn” made by a group of scholars, from diverse disciplines, who have discovered the value of interdisciplinarity and multi-disciplinarity in the quest for deeper understanding of religion. It may be hoped that these studies, some of which raise uncomfortable questions for religious communities, as academic study of religion often does (e.g., is it really the case that women have never been ordained in the Catholic Church?), may be read as an invitation to the kinds of self-critical reflection that can make for religious renewal.

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