

Gender

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What is gender? What is sex? What is gender/sex?

Historical prelude

Gender as a category of analysis has operated in a variety of ways depending on pedagogical location or historical period. For example, in sociological studies gender consists of the study of sex roles in pre-industrial and industrial societies. Or, historically in Europe, gender has simply been the natural designation of the sexes as opposite since the eighteenth century. However, in the 1960s gender became a central category of feminist studies. So for example, in feminist language studies gender becomes the means by which to look at the erasure of women by the generic term 'man' and the thingification of women as the object of the male gaze.

The development of gender as a category of analysis can be seen in the work of Margaret Mead and Catherine Berndt, for example, as a slow transformation of the belief in natural sex-roles and sex-role assignments to an analysis of the social construction of these roles. In other words, people like Mead and Berndt began to think about how the labor and roles given to men and women may have less to do with biological certainties and more to do with societal demands. These anthropologists examined women's ritual activities and beliefs among pre-industrial peoples, a focus that had been hitherto overlooked by their more androcentric colleagues. They found that the women they investigated tended to operate in a separate female sphere with rituals, symbols, and myths centered on such concerns as fertility and birth, economics, healing, or the well-being of the society, e.g. tending ancestors, the land, or myth cycles. They also became aware of two significant issues in the study of human society: one, the erasure of women and their activities from all fields of knowledge; and two, that women and men's gendered practices, e.g. work, parenting, status, were in fact social roles that were secondarily assigned as sex roles. Under the influence of first- and second-wave feminism,¹ then, the analysis of women as gendered, gender relating to both the oppression of women and creating a new subject of study based upon women, was established.

What is gender?

Gender is something we all know, or think we know. We immediately categorize people (and most everything, e.g. language, animals, planets, or inanimate objects) on the basis of their gender. We categorize ourselves repeatedly by ticking the appropriate box on a form to indicate our gender. We are careful to enter the proper washroom, and we choose particular

apparel appropriate to our gender. We presuppose gender as it is manifested in all aspects of our lives. As such, we do not question gender. However, under the influence of second-wave feminism, gender as a category of analysis emerged. Gender, in this formulation, was seen to be a way to understand the oppression of women by men. The category of gender, then, was developed in order to think about how social systems, cultures, and religions, for example, were gender coded and how these codes impacted upon women and men. This coding was seen to define, regulate, and circumscribe the group named/marked women. Equally the coding was seen to define and regulate the group called men, but as man and human were synonymous, it afforded this group privileges it did not afford women, e.g. men as priests in Catholicism.

From here, then, gender ideology, which was seen to construct and mystify (locate in nature) inequalities between men and women, became an operative analytical tool in feminist theorizing. It was used to examine religious, social, national formations and operations, and further, under the sign of postcolonialism and/or international feminisms, to examine political, social, cultural relations between nations and countries. For example, in feminist postcolonial theorizing it became apparent that often countries and their populations colonized by the Eurowest were feminized and, as such, were understood as irrational and highly sexual in comparison to the masculinized Eurowest. A good example of this is Rudyard Kipling's poem 'The White Man's Burden' published in 1897. In response to this feminization, the elite men of colonized locations often demanded the subjugation of the women of their nation via a strict gender differentiation. A good example of this is the discourse around the veil in twentieth-century Middle Eastern identity politics. Gender ideology was also used to examine economic, historical, medical, and ethical discourses, to name but a few, and their contribution to the production of knowledge. This knowledge, then, that seeks to explain human social, political, cultural organization, and production was determined to be gender coded.

In the development of gender as a category of analysis, gender was separated from sex. Sex, male and female, or the two-sex model, was seen to be a natural fact or the biological reality that gender overlays. What is assumed in such a formulation of gender is that sex is real and gender is artificial, or sex is an ahistorical (outside history) natural fact of human nature, while gender is a social and historical construction built upon that natural fact. Linda Nicholson (1994) comments that when gender and sex are thus formulated, sex is not dealt with as a conceptual category, but a biological truth. As such, then, gender becomes the conceptual category that is hung upon the 'coat-rack' of sex. Formulated as such, sex is fixed and immutable while gender is social, historical, and mutable.

In this perspective, then, an assumption resides: that sex is neutral or carries no inherent value. Gender, however, carries value and this value is subsequently placed on 'normatively' sexed bodies. Indeed, these sexed bodies are not just human bodies, but can include all plants and animals. When such proofs as plants and animals are used, they are then called upon secondarily to uphold the truth of the naturalness of the category of sex. However, in due time, the mid- to late 1980s, this kind of understanding of sex and gender, or what is called the gender/sex dimorphism was called into question (see Gilbert Herdt 1994).

Complicating the category of gender

Judith Butler (1990) and Christine Delphy (1996) also argued that treating sex as a fixed and immutable truth of human existence not only confuses the analysis, but also expresses a

necessity to adhere to a closely organized system of beliefs, values and ideas without question or thought. In Delphy's effort to make apparent how taxonomies are products of the social and therefore equally socially encoded, she pushed the analysis to include sex, male and female and the variations therein, as a social construct. She argues that sex, like gender, is a social and historical category and not a natural category. Sex is not a natural category because we already understand it in accordance with gender. We read sex through the lens of gender. As such, sex is a social and historical category. She further argued, as we read sex through a gender lens, gender precedes sex and not the reverse (1996: 30). Therefore, our understanding of men as physically strong and women as physically weak is a socially created truth enforced by, for example, girls being discouraged from developing muscles and boys being encouraged to develop muscles.

Such an argument would appear to be counterintuitive. But following the development of the category of gender in academic discourses, Delphy suggested that gender as a concept was founded upon 'sex roles' – a line of analysis that looks at the division of labor and the differing statuses of men and women. This line of thinking, developed primarily in sociology and anthropology, was picked up and used by feminists. The category of sex, then, in this reasoning, consisted of biological differences between the male and female while gender was the cultural manifestation of these differences or, as she states, 'a social dichotomy determined by a natural dichotomy' (1996: 33). Delphy asked why it is assumed that sex would give rise to any sort of classification. Her argument proceeded from the position that:

sex itself simply marks a social division: that it serves to allow social recognition and identification of those who are dominants and those who are dominated. That is that sex is a sign, but that since it does not distinguish just any old thing from anything else, and does not distinguish equivalent things but rather important and unequal things, it has historically acquired a symbolic value.

(1996: 35)

Delphy's position was clear: both gender and sex are social constructions.

Speaking of sex and its history

In 1978 the first volume of Michel Foucault's *Histoire de la Sexualité* (Paris: Gallimard, in French) and *The History of Sexuality* (New York: Pantheon, in English) was released. The series in the end would consist of three published volumes, and as the title promises, the category of sexuality would itself be historicized. To historicize sex and sexuality was to recognize that different periods of time produced different conceptualizations of sex and sexuality. Foucault's work has implications for all those who think about the categories of gender and sex. Following Foucault have been many writers who continue to think about changes and breaks in the discourses of sex, sexuality, and gender.

Thomas Laqueur (1990), influenced by Foucault, examines the social and historical nature of the category of sex. He argued that a one-sex Aristotelian-Galenic model of human sexuality was operative prior to the 1800s in Europe. In this model of sexuality, female was misbegotten and genitally inverted and male properly begotten and genitally extroverted. A one-sex model, then, was used to define the natural state of the female and male of the human species. Subsequent to this the two-sex model emerged wherein female and male sexes are understood to be opposite:

By around 1800, writers of all sorts were determined to base what they insisted were fundamental differences between the male and female sexes, and thus between man and woman, on discoverable biological distinctions and to express these in a radically different rhetoric ... Thus the old model, in which men and women were arrayed according to their degree of metaphysical perfection, their vital heat, along an axis whose telos was male, gave way by the late eighteenth century to a new model of radical dimorphism, of biological divergence.

(1990: 5–6)

The implication of Foucault and Laqueur's (see also Blackwood 1999, Brown 1988) historicizing of sex and sexuality was the dislodging of sex from the realm of nature to locate it in the realm of the social, at least for those who were convinced. Foucault made apparent that sexuality, and sex therein, as much as gender, was a politically charged category that was intimately related to power. Foucault (and Laqueur), in his historical–political foray into sex, wished to discover or rather uncover how sex and sexuality were discursively formed: 'What is at issue, briefly, is the over-all "discursive fact," the way in which sex is "put into discourse"' (Vol. 1, 1990: 11). Sex, then, like gender is a discursive construction with implications of power. Although Foucault does not read sex through the sign of gender as Delphy does, he equally recognizes that sex is a category that is central to 'the order of things' and as such is a way that we organize ourselves. Like gender, then, sex has intimate relations to the dissemination of power in discourses, and religions have often been powerful and authoritative disseminators of the 'truth' of gender and sex. For example, in Christianity during the witch-craze or witch-hunt in Europe (1450–1700) women were understood to be more inclined toward evil because of their 'normative' femaleness. Signed as inclined toward evil and in league with the devil, females of all ages were tortured and murdered in numbers estimated conservatively to be 200,000. And during the same period in India, women who outlived their spouses were encouraged or forced to commit Sati. Sati is the act of a widow being burned alive with the body of her dead husband.

Elaborating a model of gender and sex

Gender, as an academic category of analysis, has been greatly debated since the 1980s. The majority of analyses focused on two categories, gender and sex, as indicated above. In this kind of analysis, gender is examined as a social category and sex as a biological category. Although this split rendered gender very useful as a category of analysis for purposes of the study of religions, the theoretical difficulties this split raised began to be discussed in studies of sexuality, under the influence of Foucault, and in feminist theorizing. With theorists like Foucault it became apparent that sex was itself socially constructed and demonstrated a historicity of its own. The work produced by feminist academics in religious studies called into question the biological givenness of sex (e.g. the female as inherently evil and weak and the male as inherently good and strong) as a category of analysis and, furthermore, sought to theorize gender and sex as produced in and by the social (e.g. male as inherently good meant he was closer to deity and therefore naturally in positions of power such as a religious leader). But, by grounding gender/sex in the social and material two significant problems have emerged.

The first difficulty encountered, notably discussed in the 1970s, was that gender and sex were dealt with as separate formative elements of human identity so that sex was seen to

establish kinds of bodies, while gender was thought to subsequently shape those bodies. In this understanding, sex marked bodies as differentiated (fixed) while gender invested such marking with meaning (mutable). Here gender is seen to follow naturally from sex, or gender and sex are seen as superficially connected in a consecutive fashion, e.g. male is to man and female is to woman. What is not clearly theorized, then, is how gender and sex are interrelated and dependent upon each other for definition. Understanding that gender and sex are interrelated and dependent means they need to be understood as related to each other by the tension and interaction (dialectics) between the two categories. In this kind of understanding, gender and sex are related in a formative and primary fashion, e.g. man is to male as woman is to female.

The second problem that emerged in the 1980s was an absence of theorizing the interdependence of the categories of gender and sex. Instead gender and sex were presented as if they were interchangeable categories or simply synonyms. In this kind of analysis the dialectical (tension and interaction) mechanisms of gender and sex are erased. This theoretical position meant that gender ideology, or the power operations of social inequalities based on gender and sex, could not be adequately analyzed.

Understanding gender and sex as oppositional categories, the layering of gender and sex, or the blurring of gender and sex are all equally problematic. Without a clear theorizing of the dialectical relationship between gender and sex, studies continue to produce work wherein one or both the categories are reified (understood as things rather than concepts) and therefore resistant to a thoroughgoing analysis.

The difficulties encountered in the theorizing of gender as a category of analysis can be related to two basic issues: (1) essentialism (the sexed body remains fixed according to evolutionary requirements, e.g. man the hunter, female the gatherer) versus constructionism (the sexed body is mutable reflecting social roles and lives situated in particular social and historical surroundings); and (2) the lack of a theory of gender and sex.

Some of the most successful studies of gender/sex have emerged from two areas of study: feminist cultural studies (the study of cultural productions from a feminist deconstructive perspective, e.g. film, media, and written text) and queer theory (deconstruction of the discursive production of sexuality and gender, e.g. challenge to heterosexuality as normative sexuality as presented in Genesis 1:27 'So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them'). In both of these locations there has been the recognition that the categories of gender and sex each require careful delineation and intersection. Feminist theorists in the study of religion have directed their attention toward this challenge and the analysis of gender and sex, as ideology (gender/sex), should prove a fruitful trajectory for the continued development of the categories of gender and sex.

The importance of gender/sex in the study of religion

If, in the study of religion, the scholar is to understand the structural development of the system under study, and is to understand the means by which that system is communicated, if s/he is to grasp why deity in the *Tanakh* (Hebrew Bible), for example, takes on both masculine and feminine attributes, then certainly how gender and sex are understood and used to express belief about existence in ancient Hebrew systems of religious belief is necessary to know. Examining the complexities of gender/sex, as produced in the social (e.g. myth) and signed on the level of the metaphysical (e.g. symbol) and enacted on the level of the biological (e.g. ritual), means engaging the study of religion as a human signing system. A

human signing system refers to language, art, stories, and traditional ritual practices and the like used to express beliefs about existence, the world, the human, male and female, or deity.

To engage religions as human signing systems requires paying attention to such things as who is speaking; in other words, the person, the group or institution that is generating the discourse, and to whom the discourse is directed. By tracking the who and the whom in the communicative event, by paying attention to what is at stake and investigating what kinds of persuasions proliferate, one is better able to elucidate their understanding of social systems. Toward this end, then, one will want to examine gender/sex as they are delineated through religious discourses. An example of this kind of analysis is Helen Hardacre's study of a Japanese new religious movement, Buddhist *RisshōKōseikai*.

In her study Hardacre relates how Buddhist *RisshōKōseikai* had been co-founded by a woman, Naganuma Myōkō, but after her death in 1957 there was an internal power struggle. Out of this struggle emerged a new myth of origin, one that erased Myōkō as a co-founder of the group. Instead her male co-founder was given sole recognition. At one particular gathering of the women of the *RisshōKōseikai*, who had come together in order to celebrate the anniversary of their female founder's death, the importance of Myōkō within the movement was undercut directly by reference to her gender/sex. At this gathering a male elder, in support of the new male genealogy of *RisshōKōseikai*, spoke to these women about gender/sex and to do so drew on gender ideology to validate the new male genealogy. This was done, of course, in order to assert the legitimacy of masculine domination. To do this he naturalized men's domination over women via reference to femaleness and maleness in the 'state of nature':

You women know that in the animal world, it is the males who are the most powerful. Take the gorilla for example – did you ever hear of a female gorilla leading the pack? ... And it is the males who are prettiest. Whoever paid any attention to a drab female duck? ... Being the stronger and most powerful, naturally the males are the most attractive as well. What I'm trying to tell you today is that it's the same way with human beings. It's the men who are superior, and the women who are behind all the trouble in the world.

(Hardacre 1994: 111)

Delineated in a specific gender-based narrative, there is a necessity to understand how gender/sex operate on the sociopolitical level in order to know what is at stake for the speaker and the listeners. Clearly the male elder was attempting, via his use of biology, to locate men over women. But equally that the women of the group had come together to celebrate their female founder's death anniversary indicates that they were resisting the new myth of origin that located the founding of *RisshōKōseikai* with only its male co-founder.

Equally, when doing a gender/sex analysis another aspect that requires attention is awareness that the discourse of the hegemonic elite (those limited few who have control and power over the social, economic, political, cultural, and religious domains) is not the sole or only representation of the religion or culture. Often the views, perspectives, religious activities, and so forth of a small elite group of men have been, and continue to be, used as representative of the entire group. In this formulation any contestation and differences within the group related to class, race, or gender/sex are erased. To ignore such social categories as status, gender/sex, sexuality, race, or class that speak about power and that point to the particulars of social formations is to ignore the social and historical parameters of the system

of belief and practice under study. Engaging gender and sex as interrelated categories of analysis (gender/sex) in the study of religion clarifies the object of one's study.

In the past, under the influence of Enlightenment epistemology, wherein the category of the human was the origin and basis for much theorizing done in the study of religion, complexity and diversity within an analysis were erased in order to ensure the subject of European philosophy, man. This man haunted, and in some measure continues to haunt, theorizing in religious studies, anthropology, sociology, philosophy, history, and science. At the same time, those studies that have shifted from this perspective continue to remain marginal in the university. Focusing solely on this man not only misses the social complexity and the structures that hold the religious edifices in place, but also distorts the analysis. Paying attention to gender/sex, sexuality, race, and class allows us to theorize the structures and understand better the multifaceted complexity of human social bodies.

The gendering of religions

The intersection of gender/sex and religions has been of interest to a number of theorists who study religions. Over the last five decades excellent work that looks at the ideological implications of gender/sex in the study of religion, or how gender and sex effect and affect the practice of religion, has been produced. These studies share a common interest in examining how religion has been one method to ensure the subordination of women in a variety of social and cultural locations, and the absence of women as living persons within the development and dissemination of religions. Such studies have sought to reveal the power imperatives, to bring women as subjects back into the various religions under study, and to examine men as gendered subjects. From here those interested in the intertwining of gender/sex and religion have developed analyses that examine historical and social shifts in a variety of cultures as registered by gender/sex, the political efficaciousness of gender/sex, and linked to this, the intersection of gender/sex with colonization. The interrelated categories of gender and sex provide a means and a way to understand not only the how and why of religions, but equally the how and why of social organization and the manufacturing of culture in and of itself.

Gender/sex and religious ideologies

The work of gendering religions has been taken up by a variety of feminists studying religions and theology. In the late 1960s and into the 1970s the work of Mary Daly, Rosemary Radford Ruether, and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza presented some of the earlier gender interventions into the study of religion. Each of these feminists did triple duty in terms of their work in the study of religion. First, they brought tools of analysis to the study of religion in order to think about how these systems of belief and practice were used to legitimate and shape the social body. Second, each then focused on women in the religious system under analysis in order to make apparent women's activities and contributions. Third, each then furthered their analyses by interrelating patriarchal imperatives with women's contributions and activities in order to think about religion.

Daly's approach, after her rejection of Christianity, was to propose a two-world system located in most if not all societies. One part of this two-world system she named the foreground, which was a patriarchal construction operating in terms of patriarchal relations. The foreground was the site of women's exploitation and oppression, and detrimental to women's well-being. The second aspect of this two-world system was the Background, which

was the real world that was obscured by the patriarchal world of the foreground. It is, Daly argued, in the Background that women can find their true being. This dualist world system, in large measure, reflects aspects of what is called feminist standpoint epistemology.

Feminist standpoint epistemology developed by Nancy Hartsock, Dorothy Smith, Patricia Hill-Collins (black feminist standpoint), and Mary Daly, among others, takes the position that women, as an oppressed group, are in a position to have a clearer and less distorted picture of reality as they are outside, or marginal to, the dominant system of power relations and therefore considerably less invested in maintaining it. According to standpoint theory, the picture of reality developed in patriarchy (and all oppressive systems) is an inversion of reality, and those who are marginal to the system are able to see this inversion. Further to this, as patriarchy is invested in maintaining its vision of the world, which empowers it, it is unable to see beneath the surface. Only the oppressed can clearly determine the operations of this inversion, based upon their experiences, and envision a means to move beyond it. Institutionalized religion, understood as patriarchal religion, Daly argues, is one of the pillars that supports the foreground. God the father is merely an inversion of the reality of the Goddess and a means and a way to ensure that the patriarchal reality of the foreground continues to endure.

Schüssler Fiorenza's contribution to the gendering of religion came in the form of uncovering patriarchal imperatives found in the New Testament and other texts related to the study of early Christianities. This method she called a feminist hermeneutics of suspicion, which exposes the intention to locate in the heavens and in nature the gender ideologies produced by the group. So for example, Paul's letter to the Corinthians (I Corinthians 11: 1–16), when discussing men's and women's hair related to normative male and female being, makes apparent Paul's operative gender ideology, which is his own and is one that emerges from his social location and has little to do with either deity or nature. Certainly Paul supports his understanding of normative male and female being by making recourse to deity and nature. Much as in the Buddhist *RisshōKōseikai* example, Paul's understanding of normative male and female appearance and behavior calls on nature to legitimate his view. In this passage Paul understands that it is a disgrace for women to have short hair and dishonorable for men to have long hair. Working within the honor–shame oriented culture of ancient Rome, the maintenance of social standing is intimately linked to honor, and for women to attempt to appear masculine (short hair) and therefore elevate their status is a disgrace, while for men to appear feminine (long hair) means a loss of social status and therefore dishonor. Male and female hairstyles, then, are culturally coded and reflect a gender ideology.

Second, she sought to make apparent women's activities in the early Christian communities through a feminist hermeneutics of remembrance. In this gender-sensitive methodology she examined not only the actions and contributions of men, but also those of women in these communities. Finally, by combining the hermeneutics of suspicion and remembrance, she developed what she termed a feminist critical hermeneutics of liberation. Through this model she hoped to be able to reclaim Christian history for concerned women and men of all nations, colors, and sexual orientation without engaging in Christian apologetics.

Rosemary Radford Ruether's gendering of religion also challenged patriarchal imperative of religions, particularly Judaism and Christianity. She too noted the absence of women and set upon a project of reclaiming and reconstructing women's Christian histories. She too developed a project of rereading and rewriting in order to reconceptualize a new Catholic Christianity as a system of belief and practice that creates a positive space for concerned women and men of all nations, colors, and sexual orientation. By gendering religion she,

like Daly and Schüssler-Fiorenza, sought not only to understand the ideological impact of religion on women, and construct histories of women and religion, but also to move the study of religion toward developing analyses that reflected more honestly the social and historical realities of human systems of meaning.

Gender/sex and religious practices

The kinds of analyses indicated above represent some of the work of feminists in the study of religion through the 1970s and 1980s. Feminists, having learned the need to reread and rethink religious and historical texts, went on to think about how the interrelated categories of gender/sex shaped the knowledge and the systems of belief and practice that women produced. A particularly influential thinker working in this frame is Susan Starr Sered and her comparative text *Priestess, Mother, Sacred Sister: Religions Dominated by Women* published in 1994. There were of course other texts published in a similar vein, for example, Diane Bell's text *Daughters of the Dreaming* published in 1983. In such texts, theorists took gender/sex as their cue and began to examine the religious orientations, creations, and inclinations of women. At the center of their studies was an interest in women's symbolic discourses and how women's symbolic discourses might differ from men's.

Sered's introductory chapter in *Priestess, Mother, Sacred Sister* briefly relates how the author engages specifically the category of gender in order to think about what might be central to women's religiosity and how it might be different from men's religiosity. This question, circling around the category of gender/sex, assumes from the outset that if indeed there is a difference between men's and women's religious beliefs and actions, that this difference could be related to their differing social lives. She notes that cross-culturally women of differing social groups share concerns such as childbearing and motherhood, which of course intersect with economic, social, physiological, and psychological concerns. Connected to this explicitly is child rearing and related to child rearing is healing. These appear to be issues that are often at the center of women's religiosity and as such suggest a gender/sex difference.

However, as Sered notes, men and women's religiosity are more alike than they are unlike. Although concerns may demonstrate gender/sex differences, both women and men make recourse to superordinate beings (singular or plural), both use ritual to imaginatively interact with these beings, and both have central myths that organize the system of belief and practice. As female and male are not opposite in sex, so women's and men's religions are not opposite in religion. Sered (1994: 8–9) suggests that when women and men's religiosity do differ, it is related to how superordinate beings are imagined, e.g. Jesus as feminine as among the Shakers of the American Colonies; the how and why of engagement with superordinate beings, e.g. through possession to heal the afflicted as with the *Zar* cult in the northern Sudan; the shaping and understanding of ritual actions, e.g. women as ritual leaders; and the way that they engage such issues as existence, e.g. women's ritual power as social power as with the *Sande* secret society in Sierra Leone and Liberia. But equally important to women and men's religiosity is the issue of power. Religiosity can and does confer power, whether on the basis of gender/sex, status, race, prestige, or age and is a means by which power is circulated or contested. Because of the propensity of gender/sex to be related to power, it is necessary to analytically engage gender/sex head-on when studying religion.

Gender/sex and performance

Judith Butler in her formative text *Gender Trouble*, first published in 1990 (10th anniversary edition 1999), equally suggests that it is gender that supports the category of sex and not the reverse. Following up on this, she makes an extended and complex argument demonstrating what is at stake politically when the category of sex is left as fixed and immutable beneath the category of gender, heterosexism. Linked to heterosexism, she argues, is the idea that individuals are trapped, not by biological imperatives as feminism had challenged this by socializing the category of gender, but now by cultural imperatives, since feminists had left the category of sex untheorized. She states that '[t]he institution of a compulsory and naturalized heterosexuality requires and regulates gender as a binary relation in which the masculine term is differentiated from a feminine term, and this differentiation is accomplished through the practices of heterosexual desire' (30). Butler clearly and succinctly demonstrated how gender in feminist theorizing continued to uphold 'normative' ideas concerning sex and gender to the peril of a feminist analysis and its claims to be liberating.

Added to this keen observation, Butler made another equally important observation; that gender/sex is performed. Butler, a feminist poststructuralist, underscored in her text the political imperative affiliated with the categories of gender/sex, and asked what might be the effects of such an imperative. This question allowed her to conjecture how identity itself was a political category with gender/sex central to this identity. Linked to this, then, was the necessity to perform gender/sex, so that those who ascribe to (are ascribed to) the category of female must perform as feminine or those who ascribe to (are ascribed to) the category male must perform as masculine. Furthermore, those ascribed as male, but desiring to the female, could perform as feminine and those ascribed as female, but desiring to the male, could perform as masculine; although this was done at their peril since they would be disciplined for transgressing gender boundaries. Butler argued '[t]here is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results' (33).

In the field of religious studies, particularly ritual, the instability and performativity of gender/sex are eminently apparent. Most visible in rites such as female and male circumcision, one sees the instability of sex as a natural category since the cutting of the body's genitals, the primary site of gender/sex, is used to properly fix the sex of the initiate. Furthermore, one notes the necessity to perform as woman or man in the acceptance of the cut that moves the child who would shriek to the adult who would capture said shriek between clenched teeth.

Gender/sex and historicity

In the text *Spirited Women: Gender, Religion and Cultural Identity in the Nepal Himalaya* (1996) Joanne C. Watkins, an anthropologist, is concerned with the 'interplay between changing trade patterns, gender meanings, and cultural identity in Nyeshang society' (4). Her concern, among other things, is to chart the changing gender ideology under the pressure of trade with the larger world. The interrelated categories of gender and sex, formulated in relation to religious beliefs, cultural systems and imperatives of kinship relations, are shifting and these shifts, then, register change in the social body and in the social identity of the group (Buddhist). In this kind of formulation, gender/sex, then, provides a window not only into understanding a cultural system, but provides a way to chart changes within a cultural system. It is this latter function, a window for understanding social and cultural change, for example, that has led some to assume that gender/sex was a means by which

to determine religious fundamentalism, rather than a means by which to chart change. In other words, rather than assume a change toward more austere gender relations marks a shift toward fundamentalism, one should recognize that gender/sex actually becomes a means and a way to mark change in itself. Gender and sex, then, as they are both social categories are historical categories that reflect changes in the belief system over time (see also Laura L. Vance, *Seventh-day Adventism in Crisis: Gender and Sectarian Change in an Emerging Religion* (1999) who also registers changes in the social body by using the category of gender/sex).

Gender/sex and politics

The categories of gender/sex are a central concern in Patricia Jeffery and Amrita Basu's edited text *Appropriating Gender: Women's Activism and Politicized Religion in South Asia* (1998). In this text, as the title suggests, gender ideology acts as a category to register political activism. Basu states that 'in the past decade or so, religion and gender have become increasingly intertwined in the political turmoil that envelops South Asia' (3). Women, the gendered category, have, in some locations, become the repository of 'religious beliefs, and the keepers of the purity and integrity of the community' (3) felt to be under attack by the increasing globalization generated by such institutions as the World Bank, the World Trade Organization, the International Monetary Fund, and the United Nations. As noted above, gender and sex are not static categories and indeed register shifts and change in social bodies and, as the authors note, can become the means by which to initiate or resist social change. For example, the state, which can take on the masculine in relation to the feminized social body, can act as a paternalistic force that oversees the social body ensuring its proper functioning. It can be the state, as evinced in the United States in the early twenty-first century, that calls upon a particular gender ideology, heterosexual and masculine in this instance, to shore up and protect a social body it perceives to be under attack. The twin towers, symbols of American masculinity, attacked and felled in September of 2001, initiated a hypermasculine response of excessive militarism that was launched against the feminized Middle Eastern 'other.' 'Gender provides,' as Basu rightly comments, 'an extremely fruitful lens through which to interpret the actions of the state and of ethnic and religious communities' (5–6).

Gender/sex: where to from here?

As I hope I have made clear in the above, the interrelated categories of gender and sex are infinitely useful toward interrogating and understanding religions. In many ways gender/sex is a signing system that acts as a window that allows the viewer to see the complexities of human existence. Gender/sex, although still not a central category of analysis in the study of religions for many theorists, must be further sounded to push further our understanding of human social and cultural systems.

For example, in my own work I have sought to make apparent the mythological ground of gender ideology. This has been a process of revealing or bringing to consciousness the binarism that continues to fuel the ways in which we understand gender/sex. To first uncover the logic of binarism, noting that a significant root binary in most cultural systems is the male/female binary, and then to underscore the linguisticity of binarism allow for the socialization and historicization of binaries and subsequently, gender/sex. Yet this does not fully reveal just what is at stake in gender ideology.

First, gender ideology includes sex as a mythologized discourse. The foundational quality of myth – its apparent rootedness in nature – means that the social, historical, and political aspects of gender *and* sex are elided. As I have indicated, *both* gender and sex, as dialectically related categories, must be submitted to a thoroughgoing social and historical analysis. Second, what is at stake in gender ideology is power. Although this would seem evident, evidently it is not. ‘I am a man’ or ‘I am a woman’ seem not to be political statements that mark power. But indeed they do; such terms mark social power. Therefore to analytically engage gender/sex is to understand a significant aspect of the complexity of human signing systems mapped through that which we call religion.

Note

- 1 First-wave feminism refers to women's political and social action to provide women with both political and civil rights in the Eurowest during the mid-1800s and early 1900s. Second-wave feminism refers to women's political, social, cultural, and legal activities and analyses, beginning in the late 1950s and continuing to the present, toward addressing the oppression on women. Both first- and second-wave feminisms are terms used to designate the rise and resurgence of Eurowestern feminism and do not refer to the rise and resurgence of feminisms of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in, for example, India, the Middle East, or Latin and South America. Third-wave feminism is a current term that is used to reflect a shift toward representation, technology, globalization, and international feminisms that began in the mid-1990s.

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- Bell, Diane (1993 [1983]). *Daughters of the Dreaming*. 2nd edn. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.
- Bell's comprehensive and thoughtful text is an ethnographic study of Australian Aboriginal women's rites, symbols, and myths. What Bell makes apparent is the importance of Australian Aboriginal women's ritual work toward the development and maintenance of the Dreamtime.
- Blackwood, Evelyn and Saskia E. Wieringa (eds) (1999). *Same Sex Relations and Female Desires: Transgender Practices Across Cultures*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- This text is a fine collection of historical, sociological and ethnographic studies of transgendered practices. Focused upon women's same-sex desire, the category of gender is shown to be intimately connected with and foundational for the category of sex, while sexuality intersects with both sex and gender in a definitive fashion.
- Brown, Peter (1988). *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christian Society*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Brown's text is a wonderful engagement with the category of gender/sex in the formative years of Christianity. Under the influence of theorists such as John Winkler, Brown makes apparent the historicity of the categories of gender and sex, and how these categories, understood differently in the ancient world, were central to the ideological formation of a 'normative' Christianity.
- Butler, Judith (1999 [1990]). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York and London: Routledge.
- This is a formative and pivotal text that is understood to be one of the founding texts of queer theory. This text engages the feminist category of gender, pointing to the short-comings of the theorizing of the category of gender and underscoring the heterosexism that is prevalent in this theorizing.
- Delphy, Christine (1996 [1993]). 'Rethinking Sex and Gender.' In Diana Leonard and Lisa Adkins (eds), *Sex in Question: French Materialist Feminism*, 30–41. London: Taylor & Francis.
- Delphy's article is a logical and coherent analysis of the category of gender as it has operated in feminist theorizing from 1970 until 1990. She engages the concept of gender and demonstrates the limited nature of ignoring sex as a social and historical category.

Foucault, Michel (1990 [1978–1984]). *The History of Sexuality*. 3 vols. Robert Hurley (trans.). New York: Vintage.

Foucault's published trilogy intersects with the category of sexuality toward historicizing and politicizing it. Beginning with seventeenth-century Europe in volume one, he then interrogates sexuality and erotic literature in volume two and ends by interrogating sexuality in relation to Greco-Roman philosophy in the third.

Hardacre, Helen (1994). 'Japanese New Religions: Profiles in Gender.' In John Stratton Hawley (ed.), *Fundamentalism and Gender*, 111–133. New York: Oxford University Press.

This article is an interesting and well-documented discussion of the category of gender/sex and how it is used to limit the political and social power of women in Buddhist *RisshōKōseikai*.

Herdt, Gilbert (ed.) (1994). *Third Sex, Third Gender: Beyond Sexual Dimorphism in Culture and History*. New York: Zone Books.

This anthology of articles is a marvellous delineation of the multiplicity of the categories of gender, sex, and sexuality. Linking all three categories in an effort to make apparent how each is reliant upon the other, this anthology is a cross-cultural and multi-historical analysis of human systems of meaning and social organization.

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This is a nicely developed anthology of articles that examine the political aspects of both gender/sex and religion. In these articles authors note, for example, how the state and women's groups employ the categories of gender/sex, linked to religious beliefs, for political purposes.

Laqueur, Thomas L. (1990). *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*. Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press.

Laqueur's text engages the categories of gender and sex and examines how their understanding shifted in the period of the 1800s in medical discourses. He links this shift to political change in Europe during this time period and changes in the conceptualization of the human under the influence of enlightenment philosophy.

Lincoln, Bruce (1989). *Discourse and the Construction of Society: Comparative Studies of Myth, Ritual and Classification*. New York: Oxford University Press.

A pivotal text that engages ritual, myth, and classification demonstrating their historicity, their political potency, and their importance toward constructing social bodies that subsequently impact on individual bodies.

Nicholson, Linda (1994). Interpreting Gender. *Signs*, 20, 1: 79–105.

A well-developed analysis of the use of the category of gender in the work of second-wave feminists. Nicholson makes apparent the unexamined idea of the immutability of sex as a biological category which resides beneath the concept of gender as a socialized category.

Sered, Susan Starr (1994). *Priestess, Mother, Sacred Sister: Religions Dominated by Women*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Sered's cross-cultural examination through ethnographic literature of women's religiosity is a well-informed and thoughtful text. Her clear description of the multiplicity of women's religions and the rituals, symbols, and myths developed and utilized by women, allows her to speculate on common threads that link these variegated practices toward answering the question of how gender/sex intersects with and shapes religious beliefs.

Vance, Laura L. (1999). *Seventh-day Adventism in Crisis: Gender and Sectarian Change in an Emerging Religion*. Urbana and Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press.

This study, based on official and unofficial publications and interviews, examines gender, sex, and sexuality and their relations to the worldview of Seventh-day Adventists. In line with this, the author examines concepts of femininity, masculinity, and sexuality and their relation to social practices.

Watkins, Joan (1996). *Spirited Women: Gender, Religion and Cultural Identity in the Nepal Himalaya*. New York: Columbia University Press.

This interesting ethnographic study examines the changing gender ideology among the Nyeshangte, a Tibetan Buddhism group found in the Himalayan Highlands. The author theorizes upon the intersection of modernism and capitalism with the cultural of the Nyeshangte and the subsequent changes in their understanding of gender and sex.

Suggested reading

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