

## From *Feminism and Religion: An Introduction*

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### *The Academic Study of Religion*

Religion was the last of the controversial, passion-inspiring human pursuits—such as politics, economics, and ethics—to be accorded its own academic discipline in the neutral setting of research, debate, and free thinking that characterizes the university. As an undergraduate, I could not major in religious studies because the state university system in which I was educated did not believe it was possible for a public institution to teach religion without violating the separation of church and state. Eight years later, I returned to that same system to teach religious studies to undergraduates. What had changed in educational philosophy in the intervening years?

The single greatest change that enabled religious studies to emerge as an academic discipline was the recognition that one could *understand* a religious position without *adhering* to it. I believe that this recognition was made possible by the study of non-Western religions; more removed from sectarian battles within culturally familiar religious settings, scholars realized that they could understand and appreciate, with great empathy, a point of view that they did not share. Therefore, such understanding could also be taught to others, without the rancor, dogmatism, competitiveness, hostility, and suasion that typically characterize sectarian religious education. Knowing about and understanding a religion is quite different from believing in it. The academic study of religion depends on that distinction.

Another major factor in the development of religious studies was the recognition that since religion has been a major mover and motivator in human culture from time immemorial to the

present, it is impossible to understand human history and culture while ignoring religion. Only an extremely artificial division of human life and culture could tolerate the teaching of history, art, or social custom without understanding their connection with religion. Those trained in these disciplines are not fully prepared to explicate the religious beliefs that inform their subject matter; scholars formally trained in religious studies could contribute greatly to the overall environment of inquiry and learning that characterize a university.

Finally, the new imperative to understand divergent cultures, worldviews, and value systems in our complex world has brought religious studies to the fore. Except for anthropology, no academic discipline is so thoroughly imbued with the mandate to study its matter cross-culturally as is religious studies. In fact this characteristic of religious studies was essential to its development; to justify themselves as practitioners of a genuine academic discipline rather than a sectarian recruiting exercise, professors of religious studies encouraged a cross-cultural, comparative dimension in the field from the beginning. "To know one religion is to know none" paraphrases a famous and widely circulated statement made by Max Müller (1823–1900),<sup>1</sup> often credited as the founder of comparative studies in religion.

What is the academic study of religion? At the most basic level it is a descriptive discipline that gathers and disseminates accurate information about the variety of religious beliefs and practices people have entertained and engaged in throughout time and space. The academic study of religion, I often say on the first day of class, takes controversial material about which people

care deeply and places it in the neutral setting of the academic classroom, so that we can examine it and learn about it. Personal agreement or disagreement with the symbols, rituals, and beliefs about which we are learning is largely irrelevant at this stage. Scholars may debate alternative hypotheses about the information being studied, but debating the truth or falsity of the religious ideas is irrelevant to the academic study of religion as a descriptive discipline. If one truly understands what the academic study of religion is about, it will not be problematic or stressful to learn that Hinduism and Christianity have very different ideas about deity, and to learn both sets of ideas. And it will not be too tempting to argue that the Christian, Hindu, or some other view of deity is "correct." . . .

Though professionals in the study of religion do not agree on a single definition of religion, it is clear that a nonethnocentric definition of religion would not focus on the *content* of belief systems. There are no universally held religious beliefs or symbols. But the various beliefs and symbols found in the world's religions do share a similar *function* in human life. Religious beliefs and behaviors typically answer people's questions regarding matters of significant, overriding importance to them. Thus, many widely used definitions of religion in the academic study of religion talk of religion as one's "ultimate concern" or what one regards as sacred. Central to any particular religion is its worldview, the basic, often unconscious presuppositions its followers hold about the nature of reality.

By this definition any belief that functions as the most significant arbiter for decisions and actions and any behaviors whose value is unlimited to the actor are religious beliefs and behaviors, whatever their content. This definition is both broad enough to avoid ethnocentrism and specific enough to distinguish religious phenomena from nonreligious phenomena. Things of limited importance or significance are not religious. This definition also allows one to study the "religious" dimensions of phenomena not usually classified as religion, such as political

allegiance and deeply held psychological orientations. This working definition of religion is especially helpful when considering the impact of feminism on religious studies.

### *Religion and Religious Studies*

When discussing controversial subjects about which people already have strong opinions, employing empathy is the only pedagogically appropriate method. Without empathy, we cannot attain the accuracy that is so central to academic teaching and learning.

How does empathy work in the academic study of religion? I define empathy as a two-step process. First, it involves temporarily dropping, or "bracketing," one's own worldview, values, and preconceptions as much as possible while engaged in study. The subject matter should be approached with an open mind, which includes the possibility of leaving the learning situation changed by new knowledge. Second, empathy involves imaginatively entering into the milieu of the phenomenon being studied. One cannot *become* an insider, contrary to the expectations of some who want to appropriate completely the perceptions and views of the insider. But one can and should understand and appreciate why insiders feel compelled by their views and behaviors. Scholars of religion try to speak as if they participate in the point of view under discussion, though they well may not. For example, one of my all-time favorite teaching evaluations, meant as a criticism but taken as a compliment, read, "The problem with her is that she teaches all those religions as if they were true!"

To continue the example introduced earlier, the academic study of religion may seek to impart accurate information about Christian and Hindu concepts of deity, which are quite different from each other. Those involved in the learning enterprise should be able to explain and *understand* why a Hindu finds a plurality of divine images cogent with the same facility that they can explain and understand why a Christian finds monotheism compelling.

Without such empathy, one can be neither accurate nor informed about religion, nor can one acquire what limited objectivity is possible in the study of religion. More dangerous, without such empathy, the acquisition of information may increase ethnocentrism, intolerance, and chauvinism. Someone who learns that Hinduism encourages multiple images of the divine and that such images are often venerated in their painted or sculpted forms, without learning to understand why such concepts and practices make sense to the Hindu, has not been helped by the academic study of religion. She may, in fact, be more dangerously ill informed than before, precisely because she has more facts at her disposal, but does not understand them accurately and empathically.

Thus, as empathic scholars, we come to the issue of the relationship between religious studies as a discipline and the personal practice of religion, an issue which should be faced head-on rather than skirted. Although religious studies is not instruction about what one should believe religiously, learning information about religious views and behaviors other than one's own can still be unnerving. Truly understanding religious data requires empathy, but empathy often changes the way we think about the world and our place in it. This is not to say that our religious affiliation will change when we study religion academically and empathically, but our *attitudes* about religion may well change. Some attitudes we had previously rejected may become more appealing, whereas others that had seemed obviously correct may become less tenable. Such changes are especially likely when studying feminism and religion together. To expect or advocate otherwise is to promote academic learning in the worst sense of the term *academic*: a collection of irrelevant information that does not affect its bearer in any way.

If the practice of empathy is so important to the academic study of religion, does that mean that one can never evaluate the religious beliefs and behaviors being studied? This question is quite important in the study of feminism and

religion, since most feminists criticize religious patriarchy. The practice of empathy does not mean that one must agree with or approve of the point of view being studied; although empathy involves appreciatively entering into the spirit of that which is being studied, one could not agree with all the positions one understands empathically because many are mutually exclusive.

Some kinds of evaluation are not incompatible with empathic understanding, if a few basic ground rules are observed. First, an empathic understanding of the religion must *precede* evaluation. Before formulating suggestions or critiques, it is important to have some idea of the justifications for current beliefs and behaviors put forth by those who adhere to them. Otherwise the evaluation is likely to be extremely ethnocentric, a problem to which feminism is not immune. Second, the same evaluative standards must be applied to all traditions, whether familiar or foreign, whether one's own or that of another.

Most scholars of religious studies talk more about the importance of neutrality and objectivity than they do about empathy, and indeed certain commonsense meanings of neutrality and objectivity are appropriate for the academic study of religion. The academy is not the place for proselytizing for any specific religion or religious position. Full and fair presentation of the strengths and weaknesses of all positions studied can and should be expected. However, although students and teachers should exhibit neutrality concerning interreligious competition and rivalry, a completely value-free position is impossible. Being objective and neutral when discussing controversial issues does not mean being value-free. On closer inspection, "objectivity" often turns out to be nothing more than advocacy of the current conventions and not a neutral position at all. Some perceive feminist scholarship as adversarial because it challenges such conventions; still, feminist scholarship can claim to be more "objective" than male-centered scholarship, because it is more inclusive and therefore more accurate.

Looking more deeply into neutrality and objectivity as they pertain to the academic study of religion helps to fully clarify the relationship between religious studies and religion. Students of religion sometimes expect or even hope that academic neutrality means that what they learn about the variety of religious phenomena will not affect their beliefs in any way. But simply because the academic study of religion is neutral vis-à-vis competing religions' claims does not mean that it is value-free. The study of religion can never be value-free because the very existence of the discipline depends on this value: the development of a worldview that cherishes a neutral position vis-à-vis the various religions as well as an ability to see the internal coherence and logic that empowers each of them. This value is emphatically rejected by at least some segments of all major religions.

In other words, living with religious diversity and regarding it as an interesting resource, rather than an undesirable deviation from truth, are the values that dominate the academic study of religion. Information about unfamiliar perspectives on religion is meant to challenge monolithic or universalistic presuppositions about the world. One *should* feel that sexist, racist, ethnocentric, and religious chauvinisms, if present, are being threatened by the academic study of religion. Even neutral and objective information, if absorbed—rather than merely memorized, can change the one who assimilates that information. It is rarely possible to conclude one's studies carrying the same opinions regarding religious, ethnic, class, gender, and cultural diversity with which one began.

The academic study of religion is radically deabsolutizing because accurate information about and empathy for the other is radically deabsolutizing. Once one really understands the point of view of "the other" or the foreign, claims that one's belief is the only truth are no longer as attractive or compelling. This is the most significant point of contact between the academic study of religion and the way in which religion is sometimes practiced as a personal

faith perspective. If religion necessarily involves war among absolute truth claims, its subject matter would be too disruptive and counterproductive to the rational and dispassionate discourse favored in the academy. But the empathic understanding required in the academic of religion encourages one to separate the absolutism some religions claim for themselves from information about their beliefs and practices, resulting in deabsolutized understanding of all religions and deabsolutized appreciation of religious pluralism and diversity.

For some, the appreciation of religious diversity is difficult because it contradicts religious instruction they have received. It may be helpful for people experiencing this difficulty to realize that it is quite possible to appreciate one's own perspective without believing that all people everywhere should adopt it. Such appreciation is a *different*, not a *lesser*, valuing of one's own particularity. This distinction is often difficult to appreciate at first, but I believe that no other alternative is possible in the global village in which we live. No lesson learned from the academic study of religion could be more valuable.

Like neutrality, objectivity in the study of religion is more complex than it appears. Because religion is so controversial and engenders such passion, calls for objectivity—approaching the subject without a point of view—are frequent. But all scholars speak and write from a particular point of view whether or not they claim objectivity for themselves. Once scholars agree upon methodological rules that determine what data are relevant and what techniques of interpretation are standard, scholarship can, in fact, be relatively "objective" within the limits of that system. For example, male-centered scholarship agreed upon the rule that data about women did not need to be included. Scholars abiding by that rule can do "objective" scholarship that is not gender inclusive. But when other scholars challenge that rule by demonstrating that one should also include data about women, it becomes clear that male-centered scholarship was objective only in a limited sense.

Because academic fashions can become relatively entrenched and long lasting, methodologically less reflective scholars sometimes think that their work is genuinely objective. Nevertheless, their work does not transcend the worldview and the methodology within which they record and interpret. It is not objective in the sense of having no perspective or reflecting no interests and values. Claims of objectivity from a scholar who is relatively unaware of his biases and perspectives do not obviate or negate his actual standpoint.

This issue is especially important for feminist studies in religion, since feminist scholarship is often thought to be “biased” because it self-consciously and deliberately includes information about women, whereas conventional androcentric scholarship is not similarly regarded as biased because it includes more information about men. For example, some believe courses on women and religion or gender-balanced mainstream courses on religion to be biased because they present more information about women than other courses do. But these kinds of claims only mask a desire to hear familiar perspectives and emphases, a wish that assumptions that have been taken for granted should not be challenged. This mistaken perception of bias is intensified because feminist scholars usually make their methodological values explicit, whereas conventional androcentric scholars usually do not, thereby fostering the illusion that they are without any specific agenda. But first-generation feminist scholars such as myself, who were reared to regard the generic masculine as genuinely generic and inclusive but could not find ourselves and our sisters in the data we studied, will never again be naive enough to think scholarship can be value-free.

Instead, scholars need to practice intense methodological self-awareness and introspection, combined with honest self-disclosure. Once one recognizes one’s own standpoint, one can then argue on its behalf, making the case openly that this specific standpoint is more adequate than the alternatives. For example, when

teaching my course on world religions, I always explain that I teach from a perspective that values diversity because only that approach promotes harmony and well-being in the global village. I also explain that the course will be gender balanced, which, to those used to androcentrism, may give the false impression that the course focuses on women. Likewise, in my course on feminist theology, I explain that, by definition, this course is quite critical of conventional religious points of view. Furthermore, in a course on feminist theology, neutrality involves presenting the various options within feminist theology but does not include antifeminist arguments or conventional theology in addition.

I also state openly that in my *viewpoint*, scholarship that values pluralism and diversity is more moral and humane than scholarship that longs for universal agreement and unity, and that in my viewpoint, gender-balanced and gender-inclusive scholarship is far more objective than androcentric scholarship, simply because it is more complete. Having stated the values that guide my scholarship and teaching, I have achieved the level of objectivity that is possible. Everyone, including me, knows *why* I include the data that I include and why I prefer the interpretations that I prefer. I can argue cogently for those preferences. Other scholars may offer other points of view, but not greater objectivity.

### *Feminism as Academic Method and as Social Vision*

Learning feminist perspectives is more likely to change one’s personal point of view than the academic study of religion. But popular perceptions of feminism, many of which are negative, have little to do with feminism as it intersects with the academic study of religion. Because such different impressions of feminism are found in our culture, it is important to clarify what is meant by feminism in this book.

The most basic definition of *feminism* is the conviction that women really do inhabit the

human realm and are not “other,” not a separate species. Sometimes I wear a T-shirt that proclaims: “Feminism is the radical proposition that women are human beings.” This proclamation seems so simple and obvious, but its implications are profound and radical because neither conventional scholarship nor lifestyles really take the humanity of women seriously. Fully internalizing that statement involves a subtle and profound change of consciousness for both men and women. Living it out definitely involves a change in lifestyle for most people.

This definition of *feminism* has implications for both the academic study of religion and for the personal practice of religion because feminism can be understood as both an academic method and as a social vision. Although these two forms of feminism are interdependent because both grow out of the paradigm shift that occurs with the realization that women are human beings, they are more easily understood if they are initially separated. I prefer to call feminism as academic method *women studies*, to highlight the fact that it has no political implications, or agenda (even though it arose out of one) and to differentiate women studies from *feminism*, by which I mean a critical and reconstructive stance vis-à-vis the institutions and values of one’s own culture, religion, and academic environments.

### *Women Studies: Feminism as Academic Method* -

One can use feminism as an academic method without embracing feminism as a social vision. Scholars who are reluctant to change their lifestyle to transcend gender roles and stereotypes and otherwise accommodate the full humanity of women nevertheless should recognize the need to study women as thoroughly, as critically, and as empathically as men. To do less is to fail to understand the human. Women studies has irrevocably changed our information-gathering habits, so that we can never again be content to know only what men did or

thought, or to have a reading list that includes only male authors (unless men are the subject of the study). Every course in the religious studies curriculum would change if those who taught it and took it understood that women are human beings whose lives are not adequately covered and included by the “generic masculine.”

The first challenge of women studies is to expose and critique the androcentrism that underlies most traditional scholarship. I will offer a simple example of this androcentrism in lieu of a definition. I have often heard or read the equivalent of the following statement: “The Egyptians allow (or don’t allow) women to. . .” The structure is so commonplace that even today many do not see what is wrong with it. But for both those who make such statements and for those who hear them without wincing, real Egyptians are men. Egyptian women are objects acted upon by real Egyptians, but are not themselves full Egyptians. What, in more analytical terms, is behind this long-standing habitual pattern of speech? The androcentric model of humanity has three central characteristics that, when stated bluntly, suffice to demonstrate both the nature and the inadequacy of androcentrism.

First, the male norm and the human norm are collapsed and seen as identical. Recognition that maleness is but one kind of human experience is minimal or nonexistent. . . . Thus in androcentric thinking, any awareness of a distinction between maleness and humanity is clouded over, and femaleness is viewed as an exception to the norm.

The second characteristic of androcentrism follows directly from the first. When I first questioned the completeness of androcentric accounts of religion, my mentors told me that the generic masculine includes the feminine, making it unnecessary to study women specifically. This is a logical implication of collapsing maleness with humanity, but the result is that research about religion actually deals mainly with the lives and thinking of males, whereas women’s religious lives are treated much more

peripherally, as a footnote or a short chapter toward the end of the book. The habit of thinking and doing research in the generic masculine is so ingrained that many scholars are genuinely unaware that the religious lives and thoughts of men are only part of a religious situation.

The third and most problematic aspect of androcentrism is its attempt to deal with the fact that, since men and women are taught to be different in all cultures, the generic masculine simply does not cover the feminine. The generic masculine would work only in religions or cultures that had no sex roles, but no such culture exists. Therefore, women must sometimes be mentioned in accounts of religion. At this point, adherents of the androcentric model of humanity reach a logical impasse. Their solution to this impasse is the most devastating component of the androcentric outlook. Because women inevitably deviate from male norms, androcentric thinking deals with them only as objects exterior to "mankind," needing to be explained and fitted in somewhere, having the same epistemological and ontological status as trees, unicorns, deities, and other objects that must be discussed to make experience intelligible. Therefore, in most accounts of religion, although males are presented as religious subjects and as namers of reality, females are presented only in relation to the males being studied, only as objects being named by the males being studied, only as they appear to the males being studied.

Nothing less than a paradigm shift in our model of humanity will remedy these problems. Instead of the current androcentric, "one-sexed" model of humanity, we need an androgynous, "two-sexed" or bisexual model of humanity. A more accurate model of humanity would compel recognition that humans come in two sexes and that both sexes are human. It would also recognize that in virtually every religion, culture, or society, gender roles and stereotypes intensify biological sexual differences. As a result, men's and women's lives are

more separate and different from each other's than is biologically dictated. An accurate model of humanity would also forbid placing one gender in the center and the other on the periphery. Androgyny as a two-sex model of humanity, as the conviction that despite gender and sexual differences, women and men are equally human, meets those requirements; both traditional androcentrism, which object[ifies] women, and a sex-neutral model of humanity, which ignores the reality of culture-based gender roles, do not. . . .

When this model of humanity and these methodological guidelines are applied to virtually any subject in the humanities or social sciences, massive changes in scholarship result, affecting what one studies, how one studies it, what conclusions one draws from research data, the analyses one finds cogent, and the overarching theories that one accepts as good basic tools with which to understand the world. Furthermore, internalizing this model of humanity often results in a transformation of consciousness so profound that one's everyday habits of language and perception change as well. Once one makes the change from an androcentric to an androgynous model of humanity, other models seem completely inadequate.

It is important to recognize that feminist scholarship does not inherently make judgments about what women's position in society should be. It only entails a requirement to study women thoroughly and completely. To construct a feminist vision of society is a different task. Therefore, feminism, at least in the academic context, is first and foremost an academic method, not a socio-political perspective. The key issue is including information about women in all studies about any human phenomenon. The scholar's personal views are irrelevant to whether he has an academic obligation to teach a gender-balanced course: Even nonfeminists must include information about women in their scholarship if they want to claim that their scholarship is accurate.

### *Feminism as Social Vision*

My claim that feminism is, *first*, an academic method is controversial because the emergence of the feminist method was inextricably linked with a movement of social protest and dissatisfaction. Indeed, the methodological demand to gather and include information about women could not have emerged and flourished apart from feminism as an alternative social vision, for it was protest against women's limited options in American society that first impelled feminist scholars to notice and name androcentricism and to create women studies methodology.

Feminism as social vision deals with views about ideal social arrangements and interactions between women and men. Therefore, almost by definition, all feminist perspectives are radically critical of current conventional norms and expectations and advocate some degree of change in social, academic, political, religious, and economic institutions to foster greater equity between men and women. Just as feminist scholarship finds androcentricism to be the basic problem with previous scholarship, so feminist social philosophy has focused on patriarchy as the fundamental obstacle to human well-being for women, as well as for men, to a lesser extent. Just as androcentricism regards men as normal and women as exceptions to the norm, so patriarchy regards men as rightful leaders and holders of all positions that society values, whereas women should be subservient and help men maintain their status. As such, the word *patriarchy* has become feminist shorthand for the anti-vision of female subservience and irrelevance that fueled much of society and religion for the past several thousand years and led to the mind-set in which the androcentric model of humanity not only found acceptance, but reigned without conceptual alternatives.

For more than twenty years, feminists have discussed the creation, outlines, and inadequacies of patriarchy and have formulated visions of a postpatriarchal world. Because women in a number of religious traditions are feminist and

use feminist ideals to critique and reenvision their traditions, feminism as a social vision, although different from women studies, does in fact intersect with the academic study of religion. Feminists' use of feminism as a social vision in their reflections on their religions has become data for the academic study of religion. Therefore, the ways in which feminism as a social philosophy has affected, criticized, and changed the world's religions must be included in academic study of contemporary religion.

Feminism as social vision relies upon the results of feminist scholarship in history, sociology, and psychology, as well as religion. The most important conclusion of feminist scholarship is that patriarchy is the cultural creation of a certain epoch in human history, not an inevitable necessity of human biology.<sup>2</sup> The importance of this claim is that whatever is created within time is subject to decay and dissolutions a point commonplace in Buddhism among other major religions. This realization overcomes the advice given to generations of rebellious daughters: "You can't do anything about *that*." One *can* do something about patriarchy, though the task is immense.

Well before feminists felt confident of the case that patriarchy emerged relatively late in human history, they were very clear in their critique of it. The early literature of feminism was an outcry of pain; from the nineteenth century on, feminists have claimed that patriarchy is "without redeeming social value," that it is dearly linked with the most destructive forces in human history, and that it harms all people, including men, though not as obviously, directly, or extremely as it harms women.

What about patriarchy makes it such an offensive system to its critics? The literal meaning of patriarchy—"rule by fathers"—provides two clues. First, patriarchy is a system, in which rulership, "power over," is quite central; second, by definition, men have power over women. The extent of men's power over women was the first element of the complex to be thoroughly recognized and described. Men monopolize or domi-



nate all the roles and pursuits that society most values and rewards, such as religious leadership or economic power. Therefore, inequality became one of the first patriarchal demons to be named. Furthermore, men literally ruled over women, setting the rules and limits by which and within which they were expected to operate. Women who did not conform, and many who did, could be subjected to another form of male dominance—physical violence.

As the analysis of patriarchy deepened, many feminists focused not merely on the way in which men hold power over women, but also on the centrality of the concept of having power over others in patriarchal society. Many see male power over females as the basic model of all forms of social hierarchy and oppression. From this conclusion, many analysts move on to link patriarchy with militarism and with ecologically dangerous use of the environment. This conclusion is based on the fact that all these policies share an attitude of glorifying and approving the power of one group over another as inevitable and appropriate.

In my view, these typical feminist diagnoses are correct but incomplete because they do not sufficiently clarify the fundamental aspiration of modern feminism, which is far more important than equality or total lack of hierarchy: *freedom from gender roles*. I believe that gender roles are the source of the pain and suffering in current gender arrangements and that eliminating them is the most essential aspect of the program to overcome that pain. If people are forced to find their social place on the basis of their physiological sex, then there will be suffering and injustice even in a situation of “gender equality”—whatever that might mean.

The difference between freedom from gender roles and gender equality is profound. Any concept of gender equality presupposes the continued existence of gender roles and all the imprisoning implied in such conditions. Early liberal feminists usually envisioned equality as meaning that women should be able to do the things men had always done, and, sometimes,

that men should be forced to do the things that women had always done. This definition depends on the fact that the male role (rather than men) is preferred to the female role. A frequently cited alternative meaning of equality is that what women do should be regarded as of *equal value* with what men do—a version of separate-but-equal thinking that is often advocated as a conservative alternative to patriarchy.

Neither of these visions of equality escapes the prison of gender roles. Claiming that the female role is distinctive, but of equal rather than of inferior value, still assumes that only women can fulfill the female role and that all women must conform to that female gender role. Giving women access to men’s roles, which often requires an attempt to get men into women’s roles as well, comes closer to conceptualizing the basic truth that gender roles are the problem to be overcome, but it still collapses sexual identity and social roles. Whenever sexual identity and social roles are conflated, even when the possibility of “cross-over” is acknowledged, the result is a kind of anatomy-is-destiny thinking, which allows no hope for postpatriarchal vision of life outside the prison of gender roles.

On the other hand, if we do not merely suggest or validate crossovers between sexual identity and social role but break the links between sexual identity and social roles altogether, then a social order beyond patriarchy becomes inevitable. Patriarchy depends, in the final analysis, on fixed gender roles. Without gender roles, no one will have automatic access to any role or automatic power over another because of her physiological sex.

Seeing the problem as gender roles and the vision as freedom from gender roles also puts the feminist critique of patriarchy as “power over” in another light. The abuse of power is certainly a major human problem, and patriarchy is rife with abuse of power. But one of the most abusive aspects of patriarchal power is men’s automatic, rather than earned or deserved, power over women. Though we must

guard against abuses of power, a totally egalitarian society in which no one has more influence, prestige, or wealth than anyone else seems quite impossible. Given that hierarchy is inevitable, therefore, the issue is establishing *proper hierarchy*. This complex and difficult topic cannot be fully explicated in this context, but I must clarify that proper hierarchy is not the same thing as what feminists mean by "domination" or "power over" in their critique of the patriarchal use of power. It connotes the proper use of power that has been properly earned, a topic not much explored in feminist thought. But if postpatriarchal vision is freedom from gender roles, men would no longer automatically receive any power, prestige, influence, or position simply because of their sex. Though following this guideline would not, by itself, guarantee proper hierarchy, it would abolish the worst abuses of patriarchal power.

My claim that the problem of patriarchy is the very existence of gender roles and that postpatriarchy is freedom from gender roles is both radical and controversial. Some may well feel that a world without gender roles is even more unlikely to develop than a world without relationships of domination and submission. Some may think that feminists' goal should be finding and institutionalizing more equitable and just gender roles, rather than abolishing them. It is clear, however, that virtually every feminist critique of patriarchy and every feminist agenda for the future really derives from an unstated assumption that sex is not a relevant criterion for awarding roles or value. Furthermore, any set of gender roles whatsoever will be a prison for those who do not readily fit them. Because the prison of gender roles has been one of the greatest sources of suffering in my life, I am reluctant to make any place for them in a visionary postpatriarchal future.

What might life free from gender roles be like? In some ways, one's sex is important and in other ways not at all. In some ways, it remains necessary to rely on traditional concepts of masculinity and femininity, at least in the short run,

and in other ways they are already irrelevant. I think of my own life as participating in a postpatriarchal mode of existence. I am a female; I do not fill the female gender role or the male gender role; I believe that my psychology and lifestyle are both traditionally feminine and traditionally masculine. Thus, my own experience provides me with some of the guidelines for a postpatriarchal future free of gender roles. Sexual identity remains clear. Sexual differentiation is so obvious and so basic that it seems impossible to ignore or deny one's sex. But one's sex implies nothing inevitable about one's reproductive decisions, one's economic and social roles, or even one's psychological traits and tendencies.

Would "masculinity" and "femininity" have any meaning in a world free from the prison of gender roles? On this question, there is no feminist consensus. My own views, largely derived from Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhist ideas about the masculine and the feminine, call for completely severing the idea that men should be masculine and that women should be feminine, while continuing to use the terms as symbols. Because the experience of paired entities is so common, we have inherited a whole repertoire of traits and qualities that are commonly labeled "masculine" and "feminine." That, in itself, is not problematic, so long as we remember that these labels are products of culture, not biology, and differ considerably from culture to culture. What imprisons is the expectation that women should be feminine and men should be masculine. But without the prison of gender roles, these expectations would not hold. Instead men and women would become whatever combination of "masculine" and "feminine" best suited them. In such a context, the symbols of femininity and masculinity might well become more finely tuned, not less.

However, a *society*, free from gender roles will be much more "feminine" than current patriarchal society. Why? Because in patriarchy, women must be feminine, which demands that they be silent, whereas men must be masculine and

therefore can be articulate. As a result, in patriarchy, most public policy and most religious thought is "masculine" and quite incomplete. Some argue cogently that such partial views, although not wrong, are dangerous so long as they remain incomplete. When women become more articulate and women's experiences of femininity and masculinity become part of public discourse and public policy, society will become both more feminine and more androgynous. At that point individuals of both sexes will more easily become androgynous, whole Persons instead of "half-humans" trapped in female or male gender roles.

### Conclusion

It is important to note what links these two arenas of feminist thought. Feminism as scholarly method is critical of the androcentric mind-set. Feminism as social vision is critical of patriarchal culture. Androcentrism and patriarchy share the same attitude toward women. In both cases, women are objectified as nonhuman, are spoken

about as if they were objects but not subjects, and are manipulated by others. In both cases, the end result is silence about women and the silencing of women. Androcentric scholarship proceeds as if women do not exist, or as if they are objects rather than subjects. Patriarchal culture discourages women from naming reality, and patriarchal scholarship then ignores the namings of reality that women create nevertheless. But women studies scholarship takes seriously women's namings of reality, even in patriarchal contexts, and feminism as social philosophy encourages women's authentic, empowered namings of reality and demands that these namings be taken seriously by the whole society.

### NOTES

1. William E. Paden, *Religious Worlds: The Comparative Study of Religion* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988), p. 38.
2. Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

## Counterpoint: Having Your Cake and Eating It Too: Feminism and Religion

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CHARACTERISTIC OF FEMINIST APPROACHES TO religion is that of Rita Gross. In *Feminism and Religion* she offers basic definitions of technical

terms, discusses the relation between descriptive and normative approaches to the study of religion, explores the historical interaction between

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