

Introduction: Gender and the Study of Religion

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Gender issues are of great importance in contemporary society and culture. Although they concern both women and men, at present gender studies are still mainly focused on women because women have been voiceless for so long. Throughout most of human history there has existed an asymmetry in the relations of power, representation, knowledge and scholarship between men and women. Thus there exists a large agenda to be addressed in order to overcome women's invisibility, marginalization and subordination in history and society.

Gender has now become a critical category for the analysis of all data, including those of religion. At present most gender studies are almost identical with women's studies. Many current issues in the debates about women, their experience and self-understanding, status and role, are still influenced by or indirectly related to religious teachings and world-views, even when these are sharply criticized and rejected. At present there is often no recognition of women as agents and participants in their own right in most literature surveys in the field of religious studies. Frequently

unexamined androcentric presuppositions underpinning the work of many male scholars cause serious deficiencies at the level of data gathering, model building and theorizing in religious studies. Despite this, many scholars continue to affirm their equally unexamined commitment to 'value neutrality' and 'objectivity'. Much of their sexism is not overt, but rather a 'sexism by omission'. They do not view their subject matter in relation to gender construction and traditional gender roles, both of which create uneven and unjust power structures.

In the past, women's religious roles and statuses have occasionally been an object of inquiry for male scholars but with the growth of critical feminist awareness and women's own scholarly development, women themselves are now both subjects as well as agents of scholarly analysis. The existence of women scholars and the critical transformation of their consciousness means that their research challenges the existing paradigms of religious studies because all phenomena are examined from the perspectives of gender and power. This has introduced an important paradigm shift in the contemporary study of religion, both in theology and in religious studies.

In order to understand what this paradigm shift is about and to position the specific studies of this book within their wider context, a number of clarifications are necessary. The essays gathered here have been grouped under 'Theoretical Reflections' and 'Empirical Investigations' so as to indicate their primary orientation. Theoretical and empirical dimensions are often interlinked and cannot always be divided neatly. Yet for the sake of clarity it is helpful to keep these two areas distinct, even though they are not completely separate. While the purpose of this book is to inform and be useful as a reference work providing research results and up-to-date bibliographies, it also aims to stimulate and advance theoretical debates on religion and gender by clarifying basic concepts and issues and by asking questions about future directions.

Gender and religion are closely interrelated as our perceptions of ourselves are shaped by and deeply rooted in our culturally shared religious and philosophical heritage, even when this is rejected. Religious traditions, beliefs and practices too are shaped by and perceived from the perspective of gender. Initially, this may be an unconscious process but with the contemporary growth of critical gender studies the transmission and perception of religious beliefs and the participation in religious activities have themselves become reflexive activities. Gender studies are beginning to make

an impact on the contemporary study of religion and are setting new research agendas for religious studies. However, this is a slow process and the profoundly transformative effect of a basic paradigm shift has so far been less noticeable in religious studies than in other areas of the humanities.

It is the aim of this volume to contribute to further discussion of this development by asking why are gender variables so important, and how do they provide a new orientation for religious studies?

Both religion and gender are widely ramified concepts which can be used in either a general or more specific sense. It is important that this multi-dimensionality is always kept in mind. The following discussion will look at religion and gender in turn, consider the impact of contemporary gender studies on religious studies, and examine the methodological and practical implications of the paradigm shift in religious studies brought about by the attention to gender.

Religion

What understanding of 'religion' is implicitly assumed or explicitly articulated when referring to 'religion and gender'? We are aware of the complexities attached to the definition of 'religion', the difficulties in using such a term cross-culturally, especially in the study of non-Western religions, and the dangers inherent in the reification of the concept 'religion' evident in recent Western history, as Cantwell Smith (1990) has so well demonstrated. But what new problems and difficulties or, alternatively, which new insights occur when the notion of 'religion' is linked to gender-specific inquiries? Is the concept 'religion', then, used as traditionally defined by Western philosophy and theology, or is it arrived at by empirical induction? In other words, do we accept 'religion' as it has been historically and culturally evolved, as primarily a 'cumulative tradition', or is 'religion' rather understood as something experiential and personal, especially in relation to the personal experience of women and the different forms in which that experience finds its historical and contemporary expression? There is also the question of whether religion is mostly seen in terms of its institutional structures and historical-cultural embodiments which would require the investigation of gender-specific issues in very particular ways, or whether we can adopt in our research

a much more open-ended, heuristic concept which enables us to investigate and explain particular activities of women (both past and present) as distinct from those of men. How far were women's religious experiences and activities important and meaningful without being recognized as such from the traditional point of view of the dominant religious institution(s)? It seems to me that different studies on women and religion adopt quite different understandings of the concept of 'religion' without necessarily discussing this: not all authors are methodologically critical and self-aware. I would like to underline the importance of the polysemic nature of the concept 'religion', especially in relation to gender issues. There is much talk today about the social, cultural and historical construction of gender, but such construction applies equally to the concept of 'religion'. Religion cannot be understood without its history and the multi-layered pluralism through which it has found complex social and cultural expression.

Religion is more than an object of study. It has been described as a core concern, as expressing and addressing the sacred, or as disclosing a transcendent focus linked to ultimate value. Religion has not only been the matrix of cultures and civilizations, but it structures reality – all reality, including that of gender – and encompasses the deepest level of what it means to be human. Thus the study of religion, as the study of all creative activities of human beings, involves one's own subjectivity and reflexivity. It therefore raises complex questions for methodology, i.e. *how* it can be most appropriately studied and known. From a perspective of critical gender analysis, established methodologies prove inadequate, as will be discussed below.

Both the deconstruction and reconstruction of religious studies as an established discipline and of 'religion' as a concept – a lived and shared reality, a humanly meaningful activity, associated with both very specific and also more general, universal meanings for women – are important intellectual goals to be arrived at in reflecting on the study of religion in relation to gender.

Gender

Another set of questions arises out of the debates about gender, the necessary realization of its historical and social construction as well as the need for its deconstruction and reconstruction. There exists a difficulty, however, in that the notion of 'gender',

though applicable to both sexes, is currently mostly debated with regard to women. When looking at historical and cross-cultural data on religion, specific attention to gender issues is currently concentrated on women. It is important, though, to consider not only the construction of femininity but also that of masculinity, especially as far as it is grounded in specific religious teachings, and analyse it critically. I have seen few references to this so far. It also requires some explanation why the words 'feminist' and 'masculinist' do not function in a parallel manner in contemporary women's writing; the term 'feminist' is mostly given a positive connotation whereas 'masculinist' is seen as mainly negative.

Progress in the study of religion is slow, but there is no doubt that the perspective of gender is of increasing importance in theoretical and empirical studies, not only for the growing number of women scholars, but also for many men. Some of the most lively debates centre around this perspective, and some of the most creative insights occur here. Until very recently the study of religion has been undertaken in general terms, without specific attention to gender. Now many new questions arise, and new knowledge is discovered in relation to the gendered dimension of religious phenomena.

The idea of genderedness is an important new insight of feminism not derived from earlier philosophical positions. It represents a new breakthrough in the history of human consciousness (King, 1993a, p. 215f). As we have only just begun to study the implications of this insight, we do not yet fully understand how complex the relationship between religion and gender really is.

The analysis of gender is much discussed in contemporary sociology and anthropology where the construction of gender identity and gender relations are seen as central for the understanding of the social order of any society (Hess and Ferree, 1987; Sanday and Goodenough, 1990). Gender ideologies are frequently hierarchically organized and sexual inequality is embedded in thought, language and social institutions. Yet male and female roles and relations are affected by so many cultural variables that now, when the complexity and contradictions of local gender practices are better known, it is increasingly more difficult to state gender insights in terms of universals.

Alice Schlegel (1990, p. 23) has described gender as 'the way members of the two sexes are perceived, evaluated and expected to behave'. She simply states that it is generally agreed that gender is a cultural construct, but one can argue about this. Feminist

theorists sharply divide sex from gender; sex referring to the biologically given differences between women and men whereas gender refers to the social and cultural meanings assigned to these differences. The historical and cultural construction of these interpretations is sometimes seen as too separate from the biologically given. Kari E. Børresen (1990) corrects this one-sidedness when she considers gender as a sociobiological category and not simply as the result of history and culture. She thus emphasizes the interaction between biologically determined sex and culturally expressed gender. Her attempt to achieve greater theoretical clarity and balance, grounded in her historical work on women in the Christian tradition (see chapter 11, this volume) is paralleled by several significant developments in contemporary gender studies.

Contemporary Gender Studies

Human genderedness is a primary source of individual and social identity. When used as an analytical category it is also an important perspective for organizing knowledge. But gender has two centres, not one. A holistic anthropology must pay attention to both female and male gender construction and overcome the polarization created by some representatives of women's studies and critical feminist thought. Earlier sociological studies of sex roles took sexual differences for granted by accepting and examining them from an overwhelmingly androcentric perspective whereby male experience and roles were valued as exemplary and normatively human. Women's studies critiqued such androcentric universalism by establishing the importance, specificity and inherent value of women's own experience. During the 1970s women's studies developed into a rich body of theory, ideas and facts. The impact of feminism on traditional academic disciplines was described by Dale Spender (1981) as *Men's Studies Modified*. However, during the 1980s the influence of this critique and of feminist theories on gender differentiation led to the emergence of a new field of quite different, critical and self-reflective 'men's studies' (Brod, 1987a, b; Kimmel, 1987; Robinson, 1992). These studies highlight the diversity of men's lives, the subjectivity of men's personal and private experience in contrast to male public roles, and critically analyse the construction of masculinity (Clatterbaugh, 1990; Doty, 1993) by examining its myths and

heroes, and considering male-female relations from classical times to the present.

Many of the works in the newly developing field of men's studies not only deal with issues of masculinity and traditional male roles, but also reconsider male experience of and attitudes to work and war as well as wider issues of gender relations. Questions about the unequal distribution of power are central here and still have to be fully addressed. For some, men's studies are seen as a reaction, or even a backlash, a response to the current crisis of masculinity in the Western world. But at their most critical and best, men's studies are committed to a thorough examination of male genderedness, considered problematic in its traditional understanding and expression, and to a larger vision of profound social change. Harry Brod (1987b) has argued that men's studies is essential to fulfilling the feminist project, for it reconceptualizes the field by focusing on broader issues of gender rather than simply on women's studies. Yet Lillian S. Robinson (1992, p. 443) in her survey of contemporary men's studies has pointed out that 'even when it makes use of the insights and results of feminist scholarship, men's studies lack the urgency of women's studies'.

When studying the processes of engenderment we not only learn about gender differentiation, but often also accentuate gender dichotomies and gender polarization. In addition to women's studies and men's studies there now exists a growing number of critical gender studies which produce 'more fine-grained analyses of gender ideology' (Schlegel, 1990, p. 23), highlighting the variability and contradictory views on femaleness and maleness in different cultures. In her autobiographical work *Outercourse* Mary Daly (1992, p. 340) refers cursorily, though rather dismissively, to "gender studies" ... blender studies'. The post-Christian feminist theologian Daly is well known for her radically separatist approach which is so exclusively woman-centred that men have no place in it at all, except as oppressors. The passage just quoted continues with brief statements made by and about Daly herself: "No male-bashing!" they say. "That's very bad", they say "Bad girl" (Daly, 1992, p. 340).

Such radical separatism appeals to few women or men. The ever expanding literature on women, sexuality and gender produces a more nuanced understanding of sexual differentiation which appreciates the important contribution of new insights without denying their complexity, ambivalence and contradiction. The strength of a critical, but more inclusive gender studies approach

lies in its greater comprehensiveness through seeing femaleness and maleness, and the attendant constructions of femininity and masculinity, as closely interrelated.

In the field of religion this tension between different approaches is reflected in the critical debates about the concept of God the Father where inherent difficulties are not overcome through recourse to a direct reversal by replacing God the Father with the figure of 'Goddess the Mother'. Some women writers have tried to get away from this polarization by developing a specifically androgynous model of the Godhead where both female and male aspects are combined together in the Divine. Others again find this an unsatisfactory solution and instead suggest a monistic concept of ultimate reality which transcends sexual distinctions.

A woman professor of psychology and women's studies at Cornell University, widely known for her studies on sex roles, androgyny and psychosexual identity, has recently moved away from her earlier emphasis on androgyny precisely because this concept reproduces the very gender polarization it seeks to undercut. In her study *The Lenses of Gender* Sandra Lipsitz Bem (1993) is concerned with transforming the debate on sexual inequality by looking at the lenses through which our culture views male and female gender. Bem calls the hidden assumptions about sex and gender 'the lenses of gender' through which we polarize human beings into females and males. She distinguishes three different beliefs or 'lenses' which affect the construction of femininity and masculinity. The first is gender polarization, which provides mutually exclusive scripts for being male and female, and defines any person or behaviour deviating from this script as problematic. The effect of these two processes 'is to construct and to naturalize a gender-polarizing link between the sex of one's body and the character of one's psyche and one's sexuality' (Bem, 1993, p. 81).

The two other lenses besides gender polarization are androcentrism, which considers men as inherently the dominant or superior sex, as providing the exemplary norm for being human, and biological essentialism which maintains that male-female difference and male dominance are natural. We must become aware of the pervasiveness of these three 'lenses of gender' which are deeply embedded in our cultural discourses, in social institutions and in the psyche of individuals. Yet we need no longer continue to accept these lenses as they are. Instead of looking *through* them, we can learn to look critically *at* them for what they are and what they do to our humanity. Sexual inequalities are an

illegitimate form of discrimination which was first religiously defended as God-given and natural (Bem includes a brief examination of Judeo-Christian theology in her discussion of androcentrism) and then, with the rise of a secularized science, these inequalities have been argued for on scientific grounds in the biological and social sciences.

Bem argues for the abolition of androcentrism and of all gender polarization, including the new variety created by a 'woman-centred' approach in contemporary feminist thought. She wants to shift the debate about sexual inequality away from its focus on male-female differences on to how androcentric discourses and institutions – among which, I would add, may be counted much of religious life – transform male-female difference into female disadvantage. Her goal of eradicating gender polarization is described under the title 'Toward Utopia', a recognition perhaps of how difficult it is to create a society wherein the biology of sex might be considered as one of minimal presence in human social life, important only in the narrowly biological context of reproduction.

Bem's approach is grounded in a broad humanistic concern with the way gender polarization prevents women and men alike from developing their full potential as human beings. We have polarized human values and experiences into the masculine and the feminine, yet our culture has not yet developed a comparable concept of a 'real' human being. I would like to comment here that traditional religious teachings do contain high ideals of what it means to be fully human, but these ideals have mostly been propounded by men to the detriment and exclusion of women, and with no attention to gender specificities.

A new critical gender awareness requires that we seek a new, more differentiated and at the same time more inclusive definition of what it means to be human. This must also include the religious and spiritual dimension, but in a new way. To develop and embody such a comprehensive and humanly empowering vision demands a profound social transformation which cannot come about without the psychological revolution of which Sandra Lipsitz Bem speaks:

... a *psychological* revolution in our most personal sense of who and what we are as males and females, a profound alteration in our feelings about the meaning of our biological sex and its relation to our psyche and sexuality. Simply put, this psychological

revolution would have us all begin to view the biological fact of being male and female in much the same way that we now view the biological fact of being *human*. Rather than seeing our sex as so authentically who we are that it needs to be elaborated, or so tenuous that it needs to be bolstered, or so limiting that it needs to be traded in for another model, we would instead view our sex as so completely given by nature, so capable of exerting its influence to those domains where it really does matter biologically, that it could be safely tucked away in the backs of our minds and left to its own devices. In other words, biological sex would no longer be at the core of individual identity and sexuality. (Bem, 1993, p. 196)

I have devoted considerable space to *The Lenses of Gender* because this work expresses so clearly a major direction in which contemporary gender studies are moving through the critical examination of gender formation and gender relations, pointing to their reconstruction from a different theoretical and practical vantage point.

Gender and Religious Studies

In the area of religion more inclusive gender perspectives have been explored by several studies, as for example in Patricia Altenbernd Johnson's and Janet Kalven's (1988) edited volume *With Both Eyes Open: Seeing Beyond Gender*. More recently a substantial study of historical, cross-cultural and theological perspectives on gender relations has been produced as a team project edited by Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen et al. (1993) under the title *After Eden. Facing the Challenge of Gender Reconciliation*. Concerned with the 'decentring' of feminism, especially white, Western feminism, this project thoroughly explores the application of critical theory to gender relations and challenges the concepts of masculinity and femininity by laying bare the sources of gender brokenness in the Western world. Written from a Christian theological perspective the book examines ways of dealing with human difference by proposing a model of gender reconciliation grounded in a Christian feminist vision that embraces both women and men.

Caroline Walker Bynum, in her introduction to a volume on *Gender and Religion: The Complexity of Symbols* (Bynum, Harrell and Richman, 1986) also argues for a comprehensive rather than an exclusively woman-centred approach in the study of gender by

investigating how religious symbols relate to 'genderedness' – to people's experiences as females and males – rather than studying women's religious roles and behaviour only. It is no longer possible to study religious thought, language, practice and experience as well as religious symbols without taking gender into account, but it is still not enough to investigate the construction of gender and of gender-related symbols, which may function very differently in different religious traditions, by examining female experience alone. A larger agenda for the study of gender in religion is indicated by Bynum's statement:

Gender-related symbols, in their full complexity, may refer to gender in ways that affirm or reverse it, support or question it; or they may, in their basic meaning, have little at all to do with male and female roles. Thus our analysis admits that gender-related symbols are sometimes 'about' values other than gender. But our analysis also assumes that all people are 'gendered'. It therefore suggests, at another level, that not only gender-related symbols but all symbols arise out of the experience of 'gendered' users. It is not possible ever to ask How does a symbol – *any* symbol – mean? without asking For whom does it mean? (Bynum, Harrell and Richman, 1986, p. 2–3)

Put differently, many studies have demonstrated that while constructs of ultimate reality are conceived in a variety of ways and transcendence can be envisaged as male, female or androgynous, it is also seen as being beyond form and gender altogether. Yet at the empirical level world religions have 'maintained male social dominance in the prevailing social structure' (Young, 1987, p. 7). Another important insight concerns the fact that while 'the transcendent may or may not have a gender component, the prominent soteriology of a world religion is always gender inclusive, even when the transcendent is a supreme male being' (Young, 1987, p. 16). Most women scholars recognize the need to give priority to the female gender in their studies in order to invert the very asymmetrical treatment of women in the study of religion, but it must not be overlooked that the idea of genderedness has far wider ramifications than is often recognized at present.

The discussion so far has shown how the critical lens of gender can bring into view either a very specific or a more wide-ranging perspective. If the lens is one, it can yet centre on two different foci – the female or the male aspect of gender – or it can approach both together in their relational structure. As I have

indicated above, theoretical developments have widened out from women's studies and feminist concerns to men's studies and more inclusive gender analyses. The significance of religion for gender formation and gender relations, and the impact of women's studies, feminism and gender studies on the study of religion, though relatively neglected in earlier discussions (Langland and Gove, 1981; Spender, 1981; Farnham, 1987), is now much more widely acknowledged in general surveys on the cross-cultural study of women (Sinclair, 1986) and in the social scientific analysis of gender (Briggs, 1987). Yet in men's studies the area of religion seems to remain unexplored apart from the field of classical mythology where certain ideals of masculinity have their origin. However, I have yet to find a critical examination of the influence of religion on masculine gender construction. For this reason most of what follows is concerned with women.

In religious studies the scholarship on gender has so far been closely connected with developments in women's studies and contemporary feminist theories. In 1987 Constance H. Buchanan described women's studies in religion in an exemplary article in *The Encyclopedia of Religion* edited by Mircea Eliade (vol. 15, pp. 433-40); Rosemary Radford Ruether provided a similarly helpful entry on the presence of androcentrism in religion in the same work (vol. 1, pp. 272-6). These were the only two articles to explicitly examine the impact of feminism on the study of religion in this large contemporary reference work of sixteen volumes (for a feminist critique of *The Encyclopedia of Religion* see King, 1990b, and chapter 10, in this volume).

Buchanan succinctly summarized the magnitude of the critical and constructive tasks undertaken by women scholars in religion. The critical task implies a critique of both the religious and anthropological assumptions found in the different religions of the world. The task of reconstruction involves detailed historical research in order to uncover the voices, experiences and contributions of women in the religious history and life of humankind. It also implies a reconstruction of religious beliefs - 'the task of reweaving the sacred symbolic fabric of culture based on distinctive female experience' (Buchanan, 1987, p. 437) - and the reconstruction of ethical thought as well as the creation of new religious worlds linked to women's spiritual quest and the celebration of the Goddess. Such critical reconstruction involves the deconstruction of false universalist claims relating to all women or all human beings. The development of feminist theory on gender,

religion and culture is thoroughly cross-disciplinary: women scholars from different religious backgrounds are working on diverse religious traditions, drawing on methods and insights from several disciplines and gathering a new body of data which can form the starting point for further theoretical debates.

Also very helpful is the chapter on 'The scholarship of gender: women's studies and religious studies' in Anne E. Carr's (1990, pp. 63–94) book *Transforming Grace. Christian Tradition and Women's Experience*. This demonstrates how the insights of feminist history and philosophy are applied to the study of religion. While emphasizing the need for a feminist perspective in teaching women's studies, the author warns against a false ghettoization of women's studies within the university curriculum. This leads on to a discussion of the concept of gender in terms of 'an implied, assumed or explicit *meaning* of sexual differentiation whenever the study of women (and men) is undertaken' (Carr, 1990, p. 76).

Carr maintains that we have now reached a third stage of women's studies, which follows after a first stage of the deconstruction of error and a second stage of the reconstruction of reality from a feminist perspective. This third stage is devoted to the construction of general theories and seeks a unifying framework which may be developed around a more inclusive gender system. Carr also discusses some early examples of the critique of religious traditions and of the recovery of lost women's history in relation to Christianity. She argues for the development of an inclusive Western theology, not an exclusive feminist spirituality built on the new goddess movement.

The innovative research of women in religion means that:

... much of past scholarship is placed on a new map of religious reality. Less than half the story has been told. To begin to tell the other part is to acknowledge that women have always been involved (even when excluded or ignored) in everything human, in everything religious. As the distinct subject matter of women's studies is the experience of women, that of women's studies in religion is the religious experience, expression, and understanding of women. But the concept of gender reminds us that the experience of women has been and always is in relationship to men in the whole of human society. Thus women's studies affects the study of men (now seen as part of the whole), the study of the human in its wholeness, and religious studies generally. That wider whole will not be fully understood, given the androcentric history of the

disciplines, without women's studies as a subject matter in its own right and as a necessary transition to the transformation of scholarship and the university curriculum. (Carr, 1990, p. 93)

Carr stresses the pluralism of questions and methods together with the feminist perspective or angle of vision which distinguish contemporary women's studies from any traditional study of women. To discover the experience of women some of the major questions in any period or area of study are:

What was/is happening to women, what were/are women doing and thinking, what was/is the relative status of women and men with regard to symbolization, valuation, creativity, participation, opportunity, power, institutional and informal support and constraint? What images of the female and the male are employed in any religious context, and how are these used? What are their practical effects? How is sexuality viewed? What issues of family and society, the public and the private, class and race, need to be taken into account? (Carr, 1990: 93-4)

This quotation points implicitly to the dual nature of gender: on the one hand it is only a partial factor in explaining reality, relating to other factors such as race, class, ethnicity, generation differences, etc., but on the other hand it is also all encompassing as far as social relations are concerned. We have two sexes, no more, and the complex aspects of engenderment affect all areas of human life, not least the complex worlds of religion.

Women and Religious Traditions

The cross-cultural and interdisciplinary nature of women's studies in religion has already been mentioned and is perhaps more appropriately described as a transdisciplinary orientation. This is well brought out in the survey of feminist research in religion since 1980 undertaken by June O'Connor (1989) who has also contributed a chapter to this book (chapter 1). O'Connor has grouped the proliferating questions and studies about women and religion in terms of the three Rs of rereading, reconceiving and reconstructing religious traditions. By 'rereading' the traditions she means re-examining religious materials and traditions 'with an eye attuned to women's presence and absence, women's words and women's silence, recognition given and denied women'. 'Re-

conceiving' women in the different religious traditions requires 'the retrieval and the recovery of lost sources and suppressed visions'. Some speak of this task as 'reclaiming women's heritage'. In the study of the Christian tradition this has been linked with the development of a 'critical hermeneutics of liberation' which involves several 'moments': 'suspicion, proclamation, remembrance, historical reconstruction, ritualization and celebration'. Through this process we can uncover in Christian scripture and history 'woman as agent as well as object, woman as participant and leader as well as the one overlooked and rendered anonymous, woman as liberated by certain features of the Christian message as well as woman restricted by patriarchy'.

Such hermeneutical procedures can be applied to different religious traditions as is evident from the studies discussed by O'Connor under the section on 'Reconstruction'. Such reconstruction is described as involving two tasks: '(1) reconstructing the past on the basis of new information and the use of historical imagination; and (2) employing new paradigms for thinking, seeing, understanding and valuing.' (The quotations are taken from O'Connor, 1989, pp. 102, 103, 104.)

Theological reconstruction can apply to particular aspects of a religion or to the rethinking of a whole religious tradition from a feminist perspective. Examples of the latter are Rosemary Radford Ruether's (1983) *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* which deals with Christianity, and Rita M. Gross's (1993) *Buddhism after Patriarchy. A Feminist History, Analysis and Reconstruction of Buddhism*. The work of theological reconstruction undertaken by scholars working on the goddess has been renamed 'theology' (for a discussion of the shift from theology to thealogy see Naomi Goldenberg, chapter 6, this volume). O'Connor's (1989) article on 'Rereading, reconceiving and reconstructing traditions: feminist research in religion' discusses many academic publications which are grouped under the headings: cross-cultural studies, goddess studies, Jewish studies, Christian studies, Afro-American studies, African traditional religions, native American religions, Islamic studies, Hindu studies, Buddhist studies, feminist religious ethics, journals and other resources for further study.

Such cross-cultural studies show that women's position in religion is often a reflection, however oblique, of women's status in society. Social scientists have frequently pointed out that religious systems both reflect and reinforce cultural values and patterns of social organization (Sinclair, 1986). Yet in spite of women's

historical subordination and oppression many past examples can be found of women as active agents and religious subjects in their own right. Much attention is now given to women as religious actors, as shamans, witches, healers, nuns, mystics and ascetics. These figures are often seen and revered as women apart, as women who enjoy a high spiritual and moral authority rather than the institutional authority accorded to men. Such female religious specialists are often recruited from among women who eschew established female social roles. In fact, it is rare to find women who are at the same time religious officiants as well as wives and mothers.

Besides religious actors, women are also religious innovators. They develop strategies of resistance for coping with their own situation of oppression, but they also take part in wider religious and social protest movements. Numerous examples of women leaders and participants in dissident religious movements can be found throughout the history of religions. Of particular interest to contemporary researchers are the women founders and leaders outside mainstream religion in the new religious movements of our time (Knott, 1987; Puttick and Clarke, 1993; Wessinger, 1993; Puttick, 1994; see also chapter 12 of this book on 'Women and New Religious Movements in Africa' by Rosalind I. J. Hackett).

Another important area of research is concerned with women's experience of the sacred and female symbols associated with the sacred, or what some authors prefer to call the human constructs of ultimate reality. Many religions are rich in feminine imagery and symbolism, none perhaps more than Hinduism, but the symbolic ascendancy of the feminine often goes with a social denigration and low status of women in everyday life. Thus one must clearly distinguish between the place given to women in the world of religious imagination and that accorded to them in the actual world of religious life. These two often stand in an inverse relationship to each other and remain poles apart.

This tension is highlighted by some of the readings found in Serenity Young's (1993) anthology *Sacred Writings by and about Women*. Taken from the primary texts of the world's religions, such as sacred scriptures, law books, creation myths, hagiographies, tales of folklore and the stories of tribal groups, these readings about and by women present a rich store of male thinking about women while occasionally also voicing the religious experience of women themselves. Young analyses a number of different cross-cultural themes about women which are found

persistently across religious traditions through time and space. A particularly striking contrast is that between the representation of women as both evil and wise. The complex issue of evil is tied up with other important themes, such as those of woman's body and sexuality, menstruation taboos, the figure of the witch and fear of death. The feminization of the spirit of wisdom appears in many religious traditions, whether as Sophia in the Judeo-Christian traditions or the goddess of wisdom in Mediterranean and Indian religions, or the female Bodhisattva of compassion in the Far East.

Another area of lively debate and creative development is that of feminist spirituality. This can be understood in the wider sense of women's contemporary spiritual quest or in the specific form of a new feminist consciousness and goddess spirituality (aspects of which are discussed in chapters 6, 7 and 8 of this volume). I have surveyed the explicit and implicit spiritual dimensions of contemporary feminism with reference to different religions and cultures in my book *Women and Spirituality: Voices of Protest and Promise* (King, 1993a). Other helpful bibliographical surveys are found in the articles by Joan Leonard (1990), 'Teaching introductory feminist spirituality: tracing the trajectory through women writers', Sally Noland MacNichol and Mary Elizabeth Walsh (1993), 'Feminist theology and spirituality: an annotated bibliography', Judith G. Martin (1993), 'Why women need a feminist spirituality', and Linda Woodhead (1993), 'Post-Christian spiritualities'. Indispensable for the understanding of feminist spirituality are the two by now classical collections of articles edited by Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow (1979, 1992), *Woman-spirit Rising. A Feminist Reader in Religion* and Judith Plaskow and Carol P. Christ (1989), *Weaving the Visions. New Patterns in Feminist Spirituality*.

These rich scholarly resources raise many fundamental questions about women and religious traditions: How is women's spiritual quest experienced and explored? How do women experience their relationship with the sacred or divine spirit? How do they voice and describe it? What religious roles and rituals do women participate in and from which ones are they excluded? What religious rites, religious lives and religious communities have women created for themselves? What religious authority and power have women held, and how has the spiritually empowering authority of their experience been expressed and transmitted to others? What influence, if any, have women had in the creation and transmission of religious and theological knowledge?

These questions relate to women's actual participation in religious life. Further questions arise about the world of symbols created by the religious imagination: Which experiences of the sacred, by women or men, have found expression in female form and image? What are the female faces of the divine, or the feminine dimensions of ultimate reality present in different religions? How far are women themselves seen as sacred or, on the contrary, as demonic and taboo in some religious traditions?

Yet other questions relate to the importance of religion in women's history, questions to which feminist historians have not always paid the attention they deserve. Gail Malmgreen (1986; see Introduction, 1-10) has reminded us that women took to the public platform on behalf of religion long before they were stirred by politics. Examining the writings of the past where women's voices can be heard, she asks 'What was the nature of women's private devotions? Were women's religious beliefs consistently different from those of men? Does it make sense to speak of female-identified theologies in the eighteenth or nineteenth century, as it does in the twentieth? Can we discern a distinctively female ethical voice in the past, as Carol Gilligan has in the present?' (Malmgreen, 1986, p. 3). Looking at the women of the past from the angle of the present, one question above all others poses itself: 'To what extent did women's spiritual impulses and religious vocations, however expressed, persist in a more or less hostile environment as sources of strength, self-definition, and accomplishment?' (Malmgreen, 1986, p. 9). This question, raised in the historical context of Western Christianity, can be asked about women in all religions, past and present.

All these questions are not only questions of scholarly research and analysis. On the contrary, the perspective of women's studies, of feminism and of more inclusively conceived gender studies, includes as an integral part a strong commitment to contemporary personal and social transformation. It is this perhaps utopian goal, the strong wish to transcend all gender discrimination and polarization, to seek a holistic life-affirming spirituality and build a new society, which is the creative source of the often provocative and intellectually daring stance found among contemporary feminist scholars. Feminism is both a new academic method and also a new social vision. Both approaches have an impact on the methodologies of different disciplines. This is clearly reflected in the current methodological debates taking place among women scholars in religious studies.

Feminist Methodological Debates and the Paradigm Shift in Religious Studies

Methodological debates among contemporary women scholars in religion are much influenced by current feminist theory which fundamentally calls into question the basic assumptions of the prevailing organization of knowledge, its claims to universality, objectivity and value-neutral detachment.

In the study of religion and gender two fundamental problems arise for feminist scholars. One has to do with the subject matter of the research, the other with the attitude of the researcher. As to the subject matter, most religious phenomena, even when studied by women, still remain set in the context of an androcentric framework which defines our intellectual task in the very effort of deconstruction and reconstruction. The sources, concepts, models and theories of religious studies are male-derived and male-centred; they operate with a generic masculine which implies that men have almost always spoken for and about women. Even when studying the history, literature and religious experience of women themselves, we have to rely to a great extent on the materials and data described by men. The sacred writings of the world religions are all thoroughly androcentric. However, women are not only readers of androcentric texts, they are also writers and creators of such texts when they are schooled in and express themselves through the dominant modes of thinking of their age. Dissenting voices can be heard in the past, but they are few. A fully articulated critical consciousness of women has only developed in our own time and contemporary feminist 'gynocritics' (Showalter, 1986, p. 128), or what I prefer to call the gynocritical approach, is particularly interested in women as *writers*, that is women who as their own agents create their own structures of meaning. In religious studies such a gynocritical approach means that women scholars analyse and interpret religious phenomena specifically associated with, experienced, articulated and described by women.

As to the attitude of the researcher, there already exists a lively, wide-ranging methodological debate in contemporary religious studies in general. This is concerned with determining the most appropriate methods for studying religion. Many different approaches and positions are debated, such as that of insider and outsider, neutrality and commitment, for example. Many scholars criticize the over-intellectualist and heavily text-orientated

approaches of traditional religious studies; many are beginning to recognize that the study of religion, especially of religious experience, involves one's own subjectivity and reflexivity. The religious position and commitment of the researcher can thus influence the subject matter that is being researched. However, the current general methodological debates in religious studies do not yet take into account the specific methodological insights and realignments found among feminist scholars.

Women's profoundly new experience of critical personal, social and religious transformation makes them ask challenging and uncomfortable questions. Critically aware of their own positioning in society, they question the existing structure of knowledge and their own place in it. The process of consciousness-raising has led women to the discovery of self autonomy and self agency, but also to that of solidarity and relationality. From the perspective of these experiences women criticize the suppression of personal, subjective human experience in general and of women's experience in particular in what traditionally counts as knowledge. Attention to gender is beginning to reshape both the perception of and the participation in knowledge. In the study of religion it is therefore no longer enough to ask *what* we know about religion, but equal attention must be paid to how we come to know what we know. Feminist research in religion has epistemological significance (as June O'Connor argues at length in chapter 1 of this book). Critical attention to gender variables not only affects the analysis of religious texts, but it also raises many questions about conceptual categories governing the gathering of data in fieldwork (as Kim Knott discusses in chapter 9).

Women scholars are searching for a more experientially grounded, more gender balanced and more dialogical methodology. In doing so, they still have to argue for a feminist perspective of gender analysis which cannot yet be taken for granted. Debates about the challenge of feminist methodological insights for the transformation of religious studies have been going on since the early 1970s. Yet so far mainstream methodological works have simply ignored them. Could this perhaps have something to do with the fact that detailed textual work and revision appear to be less threatening and more acceptable to male scholars than theoretical and interpretative work which reflects women's original and independent thinking?

Without claiming to be comprehensive I shall list some significant discussions on methodology. Rosemary Radford Ruether (1981)

published an early article on 'The feminist critique in religious studies'. It focuses largely on the Judeo-Christian tradition and on theology rather than the more inclusive concerns of religious studies. But unlike other writings on the same subject, it raises the important question of how women's studies in religion can be translated into educational praxis in institutions of higher learning in terms of both curriculum development and staff appointments.

Other publications on methodology, criticizing the prevalent androcentrism in the history of religions, came from Rita M. Gross (1974, 1977, 1983) who must be recognized as a lonely pioneer in calling so early for a fundamental reorientation of the whole field of religious studies. I discussed her earlier work in my paper 'Female identity and the history of religions' (King, 1986), first delivered at the XIVth International Congress of the History of Religions in 1985. In it I emphasized that the feminist perspective is not yet part of the common horizon of religious studies and I argued 'that the development of a truly inclusive framework for the study of religion, of more differentiated conceptual tools as well as of different perspectives of analysis and synthesis requires that full space is given to the voices and perspectives of women' (King, 1986, p. 91). Women scholars in religion work in relative isolation. They can experience crises of identity due to the absence of role models and of a well-established community of discourse in their field. There exists also a continuing silence about the contribution of women scholars to the study of religion in the past (some historical examples are discussed in my chapter 10 in this volume).

The importance of methodological clarifications and of a basic shift in orientation is highlighted by numerous articles which the *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* has published since its foundation in 1985. Its second number included a roundtable discussion 'On feminist methodology' (1985, pp. 73-88) and a later volume presented another one on 'A vision of feminist religious scholarship' (1987, pp. 91-111). Other articles worth singling out are those by Carol P. Christ on 'Embodied thinking: reflections on feminist theological method' (1989) and on 'Mircea Eliade and the feminist paradigm shift' (1991).

Such methodological articles are evidence of how feminist scholarship makes use of alternative, non-traditional sources and methods which in turn produce alternative contents and structures in scholarly knowledge. The feminist paradigm in religious studies

is one of transformation. Its critique of the traditional sources and content of an established field involves an alternative vision which transforms both the subject matter and the scholar at the same time.

The methodological process can be summed up as starting with a hermeneutics of suspicion *vis-à-vis* traditional sources and methods, followed by a critical deconstruction and reconstruction of the key elements of the discipline, eventually resulting in its transformation. The close alliance between feminism as an academic method and social vision born out of a new experience and consciousness has been challengingly expressed by Rita Gross, especially in the two methodological appendices of her book *Buddhism after Patriarchy* (1993). Her scholarly self-understanding and commitment is deeply rooted in a feminist perspective which leads to a large increase in the data to be studied and also to an increase in the critical reflection on the nature of religion and on the most appropriate methods for its study. Gross argues that religion is not reducible to its cultural matrix, but that the religious impulse for world-construction, for seeking meaning and orientation, constitutes an inalienable part of human life.

From her stance as an engaged, committed woman scholar she also argues against the division of the study of religion into separate, narrow theological and historical subdisciplines. The attitude of the scholar must in her view be one of empathy and commitment while maintaining honesty and objectivity in the sense of declaring one's interests and methodologies. As a feminist engaged in the cross-cultural study of religion Gross speaks of a 'double assignment' which on one hand requires to explain the world-view of patriarchy with empathy, yet on the other hand refuses to undertake scholarship 'that extends, perpetuates, legitimates, or justifies patriarchy' which she considers as a destructive traditional religious value that must be exposed (Gross, 1993, p. 315). Her feminist and scholarly experience and reflection converge in her conclusion that the 'engaged study of religion, with its combination of dispassionate de-absolutized understanding and passionate existential commitment to just and humane values, is the single most powerful lens through which one can view religion' (Gross, 1993, p. 317).

Much important work based on critical gender analysis exists in the contemporary study of religion. Yet one can still argue over the question of whether a paradigm shift in religious studies has already occurred or whether we are only at the threshold of

a new paradigm. Feminist scholarly commitment expressed in both women's studies and wider gender studies requires nothing less than the transformation of the author's world-view and scholarship. The process of this transformation becomes visible at different levels: at that of one's personal existential and spiritual quest, at the level of scholarly discourse and knowledge construction, and also in the critique of whole religious systems. Numerous examples for these different forms of transformation can be found in contemporary scholarship on different religious traditions.

Some years ago Randi R. Warne (1989), when assessing the impact of women's studies on religious studies, spoke of moving 'toward a brave new paradigm'. She saw this move as occurring in three different areas: (1) in women asking new questions of traditional materials; (2) in the move from universality to particularity, from abstraction to engagement; (3) in the critique of objectivity and the revisioning of all knowledge as morally significant, thus raising basic questions about the nature of all knowledge. Critical feminist and gender perspectives are certainly much debated and attest to a profound transformative potential in their effect on traditional forms of knowledge. How far these debates have made a real impact on the dominant practitioners of the field and changed the way religion is studied in universities is another matter, however. Carol Christ, who has written on the feminist paradigm shift in religious studies more than once (Christ, 1987, 1991), still describes the field of religious studies as highly patriarchal and speaks of feminist scholars in religion as 'sojourners for a long time to come' (Christ, 1992, p. 87). Women's critical debates are set 'within an academic power structure which is not only male, but white, heterosexual, middle and upper class, for the most part Christian, and not particularly hospitable to feminism' (Christ, 1992, p. 86). Thus she concludes that a great deal remains to be done if feminist scholarship is to transform the teaching and research of religious studies in universities, although research and reflection on women and religion are flourishing both inside and outside the academic world.

Feminist scholarship offers exciting critical perspectives and, as mentioned earlier, these critical perspectives are also foundational for contemporary men's studies and the development of more inclusive gender studies. To maintain this critical momentum and challenge, to put into practice the transformative potential of such critical insights, necessitates that neither women's nor men's studies are ghettoized, and that gender studies are not simply

reduced to 'blender studies', as Mary Daly maintains. A successful development of inclusive, balanced critical gender studies requires also a balanced gender representation and the full participation of both genders in all areas of religious studies – in religion as studied, taught, and practised. This requirement raises many practical questions, not least about institutional power and teaching authority. As Randi Warne has pointed out, to meet the challenge of women's studies, religious studies 'must ensure that its departments are materially constructed in such a way that the presumption of male privilege is not maintained' (Warne, 1989, p. 43). Will feminist scholars always remain sojourners in the field of religious studies or will they on the contrary soon become fully established citizens and inheritors of a whole field and its wide-ranging cluster of inquiries? This is a legitimate contemporary concern which invites further reflection.

Practical Considerations and Questions

As a discipline, religious studies remains thoroughly androcentric in its key concepts and paradigmatic perspectives of inquiry, but also in its institutionalized practice with its lack of recognition of feminist scholars and their work. The study of women is still marginalized in the study of religion, and the comprehensive study of gender as a category with even larger connotations has hardly begun.

The main question is this: Is the necessary paradigm shift in religious studies possible, and can it be practically brought about? A number of problems arise with regard to the teaching of new, gender-related perspectives in religious studies, but also with regard to larger issues pertaining to the training and employment of scholars teaching such courses and researching in this area.

Some feminists are emphatic in their exclusive stance and insist on addressing women alone, but they are in a minority. Many women scholars consider it important to develop a comprehensive, integral perspective on religion and gender and emphasize that both women and men students should participate in 'Religion and Gender' courses. While such courses may initially be of much greater interest to women, male students too can get deeply committed to the intellectual and experiential issues raised, and can experience a considerable transformation of their awareness and achieve excellent results.

The practical difficulties of introducing a religion and gender course will vary from institution to institution and from country to country. It is not only a question of getting such courses accepted by curriculum and programme committees, there is the additional difficulty of finding the funding and practical support for purchasing the necessary library materials. At one institution, I once submitted a long list of book titles to a librarian who was wholly unsympathetic to this field. It came as no surprise when I found out that only very few of my suggestions ever made it into the library. I can also think of the editor of a well-known Anglican theology journal raising the question of whether feminist books were ever of sufficient quality to warrant serious attention.

Even though high-quality literature on women and religion is steadily on the increase, it is not easy to build up a library collection for teaching, especially when one is dependent on the collaboration of librarians in sympathy with the subject. Most teaching institutions and their leadership are still thoroughly androcentric, and so is much that counts as accepted knowledge in most fields. To introduce change takes time, is hard work and demands a great deal of persistence and single-mindedness.

From what I have said, it is clear that I am strongly opposed to 'religion and gender' being treated as a 'ghetto subject' for women only, but even when the participant subjects of such a course are both female and male, the course itself can still be treated as marginal in the overall academic programme or as merely a temporary concession to current intellectual fashions. The ultimate aim of research and teaching on gender issues must be a more differentiated critical perspective in all courses and in the entire programme of religious studies. This can be achieved only if women scholars take a full part in the future shaping of the whole field of religious studies and eventually constitute 50 per cent of its practitioners.

At a professional level, in terms of academic posts, career structure, promotion and tenure there are still many obstacles to this. When being considered for promotion, I was once told that 'publications on feminism are academically not respectable' – this was the view of powerful, established figures in the field. Many younger colleagues, at the beginning of their career, may have even greater difficulties in getting their work accepted. It will take more than one generation to change the dominant academic power structure and to change some of the most influential

methodologies which perpetuate the myth of 'objectivity' and 'detachment' derived from outmoded models of science. As is clear from the methodological debates referred to earlier, the feminist study of religion involves a 'participatory hermeneutic' on the part of both students and teachers which produces a new consciousness and new attitudes.

The study of religion and gender is a self-reflexive process which leads to a new, more differentiated consciousness on the part of those undertaking it. It also implies, of necessity, a self-critical examination of one's own beliefs, attitudes and experiences, and thus can lead to manifold transformations. Different teachers and students respond in a very personal and individual way to the study of religion and gender; they draw different conclusions from such a study for their own lives. In that sense no religion and gender course is a neutral, 'value-free' undertaking where cool analysis and traditional academic distancing in the name of objectivity and detachment can reign supreme. On the contrary such a course has existential implications, for it elicits personal decisions and commitment which may affect not only one's intellectual outlook, but one's entire life.

If critical attention to gender becomes a really integral part of religious studies, this will not only influence the study of religion, but also bring about deep changes in religious practice. Nowhere can this be seen more clearly than in the area of spirituality and religious ritual where women are experimenting with a fresh creativity and inventiveness unthinkable before. These experiments, and the new questions arising from them, may have consequences as yet difficult to foresee. At present, women are experimenting with old traditions and creating new ones. These prove spiritually empowering for women as individuals and groups, yet they often possess little cultural authority in a broader sense. Powerful religious institutions of the traditional kind continue to be led and shaped by men alone. Thus there is an urgent need to create a critical gender awareness and call for greater balance in the established religious institutions. Following the example of the World Council of Churches, there is also an urgent need to work for the greater visibility of women in traditional religious institutions by creating a 'Decade of Religions in Solidarity with Women', as I have argued elsewhere (King, 1993b). This would strengthen the work done at the academic level and make it easier for women to participate in equal numbers to men in the teaching and study of religion.

For historical and practical reasons the discussions on religion and gender occur at present primarily around a woman-centred focus. But this focus is itself but a part of the larger, bifocal angle of a critical gender lens. As Anne Carr has argued, feminist consciousness sharpens critical perspective, but it does not by itself guarantee the results, nor does it always necessarily produce important, insightful scholarship. Good scholarship in women's studies aims to meet the highest standards of scholarship anywhere, but it also calls into question what the most appropriate and best scholarly standards are, and what responsibilities such scholarship implies. But one thing is certain, women's critical work and reflection 'will inevitably alter perceptions of female and male, the masculine and feminine, and perceptions of gender in religious studies as a whole' (Carr, 1990, p. 94).

To sum up the developments, several dimensions can be discerned in the paradigm shift which the feminist critical awareness has introduced into religious studies. These dimensions are not sequential but coexist together and express the rich diversity which women scholars contribute to the contemporary study of religion:

- 1 There is a *descriptive* dimension: women's new awareness has made women ask new questions which have produced new materials and research results in the study of religions. Women's status, role, images and experiences, for so long neglected, have become new objects of investigation, even though these often remain androcentrically defined. Many publications and courses on women in world religions provide us with new data at the level of description, often with a minimum of critical analysis. We discern women's voices hidden in androcentric texts; we discover women's experiences and biographies, their contributions to the shaping of different religious traditions and spiritualities.
- 2 There is the *negative-critical* dimension of the analysis and deconstruction of the androcentric framework, perspectives and assumptions which mask much of the full meaning of these data. The feminist critical analysis of the history, literature and religious experience of women has to rely to a great extent on texts and data created or described by men. An additional, gynocritical analysis is concerned with women as independent, autonomous writers rather than simply as readers of androcentric texts. Women scholars now look critically at

works produced by other women rather than only those by men about women.

- 3 Following on from this there exists a *positive-critical* dimension where women undertake the reconstruction of experiences, insights and different elements of tradition to make them meaningful for us today. For some this may be a woman-centred reconstruction while others seek wider, more inclusive interpretations of religious materials. This may lead to an extended, new conversation between women and men scholars in the study of religion, a new phase of integration, a new stage of greater differentiation and complexity.
- 4 There is also the *methodological dimension*: women's critical approach undertaken from a new awareness as a gendered self in relation to others in community also requires different research methodologies which function differently from traditionally established methodological paradigms and elicit more empathetic involvement and personal concern in relation to one's studies. This does not mean abandoning scholarly objectivity and critical assessment, but they need to be modified and refined by taking into account current theoretical developments in critical gender studies.

Conclusion

As this essay has tried to show, critical attention to gender variables provides such a significant new orientation for the contemporary study of religion that one can justifiably speak of a paradigm shift in the entire field of religious studies. The important impact of gender on current theoretical and empirical work and on methodological debates provides us with critical tools for an alternative vision and different scholarly praxis which are beginning to transform and reconceptualize the study of religion.

Looking at religion through the sharp lenses of gender first developed by feminist theory produces a genuine advance in the intellectual processes, explanations and results of scholarship. Women's insights, academic inquiries and research efforts are currently at the cutting edge of contemporary scholarship. It is crucial that the knowledge gained is integrated into mainstream teaching and research without losing its critical edge and impact.

Considering the implications of the feminist paradigm for the contemporary study of religion, what are the possible directions for religious studies in the near future? It is impossible to prophesy, but it is clear that we need far more women scholars in the study of religion – ideally 50 per cent in all teaching and research positions – to effect not only a paradigm shift, but to get our new paradigm universally accepted and thereby transform our discipline more radically. In the view of some scholars, current studies on women and religion represent one of the liveliest, most creative and challenging developments in contemporary religious studies. Yet such studies are far from being given general academic recognition and acceptance. Some of the liveliest debates at present concern God-language, feminist ethics, feminist spirituality, religious attitudes to the body and sexuality, the relationship between feminism, religion and psychoanalysis. In feminist theology there is the additional significance of Third World theology which increasingly attracts attention (Russell et al., 1988; King, 1994). There is also fascinating new work being developed on feminism, religion and ecology (Primavesi, 1991; Ruether, 1992; Adams, 1993).

In looking for a future research agenda for religious studies we must also bear in mind that the feminist critical approach to the study of religion represents a paradigm shift *within* another paradigm shift which is larger still. This is the new discourse and consciousness about globality and globalization which has emerged over the last few years and which is of deep significance for religion as practised and studied, especially for spirituality. It is because of this global perspective that the theology of women from the Third World is of such great importance.

At present, the notion of difference and pluralistic diversity among women is widely discussed among feminists, but many of these discussions still remain too confined to local and regional boundaries. Women's studies are far from truly inclusive of all women, far from being comprehensive and global. This may be illustrated by just one example where others could be given. In a survey tracing the development of women's studies in religion Judith Plaskow (1993) strongly affirms that feminist work in religion belongs to a larger universe of feminist discourse, yet the universe surveyed by her is entirely restricted to North America (though it includes a few Asian women scholars teaching in the United States). North American studies on women and religion are leading in the field, but many of them suffer from their own

parochialism by limiting their discussion only to other North American authors. Plaskow's (1993) article does not cite a single non-American publication and one may legitimately ask how representative her presentation of the development of women's studies in religion is. Such studies now have a truly global dimension and include publications from many countries, in many different languages, and on many different traditions.

It is impossible to develop thoughts on religion and gender in a global perspective further here, but globalization as a process whereby we become conscious of the whole world as a single place – a unity created by the bonds of one human family – has deep ramifications for feminism, gender and religion. In the future this may bring with it a further shift from woman-centred approaches to the study of religion – where religious thought, language, practice and structures are primarily examined with reference to women – to a wider focus on religion and gender where the field is enlarged to include critically reflected data about both sexes rather than about women alone.

Feminist critical analysis has called into question the false universalism of androcentric thinking. Women must not commit the mistake now of constructing a new, false universalism of a different sort on the basis of female experience alone. We are faced with the difficulty that the notion of gender, though applicable to both sexes, is currently mostly investigated with regard to women. Women scholars, for fairly obvious reasons, concentrate their research on women; it is not their main task to critically investigate gender issues as they arise for men. Men have to do this for themselves. The next step in further reconstruction will be an additional phase of integration where female and male gender issues are brought into fruitful relationship with each other. Only then can we fully understand the complex interconnections between gender and power; and only then can we develop the strength and wisdom needed to shape the human community in a more just and balanced way and thereby radically transform the social order at both a local and global level.

Religious and spiritual values are vital for this. Women must be empowered and need to empower others to change the world as we know it. The critical voices of women in religion and in the contemporary study of religions must be heard and listened to – they are a promising sign of hope for the future of religious studies and for the future of our world.

The essays that follow exemplify as well as examine representative perspectives of contemporary women's critical studies on religion. Written by women scholars working in different countries around the world, they also demonstrate what Rosalind Shaw has called 'the gendering of religious studies' (see chapter 2, this volume). The following chapters acquaint readers with current perspectives and new research agendas in the field of religion and gender and will, hopefully, stimulate further critical debate and theoretical reflection. Each of the two parts of this volume is preceded by a brief introduction to the essays contained in it.

The bibliography at the end of this introductory essay does not only include references to the works cited but provides readers with the necessary bibliographical tools to enable them to examine the most significant debates on religion and gender for themselves. The bibliography, mainly based on publications of the last ten years, does not list the very large number of descriptive and comparative studies on women and religion (included in the extensive bibliography of my study *Women and Spirituality*, King, 1993a) but concentrates on titles primarily concerned with theoretical discussions of religion and gender.

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