

INTRODUCTION

GENDER AND THE STUDY OF RELIGION

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Ascribing gender—the distinction of humans into “women” and “men”—is an ancient and ubiquitous practice. While there are cultures in which gender ascription is weak, there are no known cultures within which gender ascription is entirely absent. Gendering is thus a common and multifaceted human cultural strategy, with implications for, and imbrications within, human social institutions (Warne 2000). Religious systems are one example of these institutions, and gendering (that is, its ascription, embodiment, enactment, transcending and/or transformation) within culture is central to their operation. It would seem that gender would therefore of necessity be a key category of interpretation for the scholarly analysis of religion. The fact that this issue of *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* is a “special” issue, however, suggests that there are elements missing from the logical formulation given above, key pieces to the puzzle of why gender is both central to religions and absent in large measure from their critical scholarly analysis. The remainder of this introduction will attempt to offer some insight as to how this situation has come to be. The articles which follow will then illustrate the richness of scholarship that can be produced when a gender-critical approach to religion is employed.

In an early essay on the methodological problems arising out of studying women and religion, Rita Gross noted:

One of the basic problems ... is that, for the most part, when questions about women arise, they are answered as if women, but not men, were one of those aspects of life, those objects encountered in the world, that somehow have to be accounted for and put into a scheme for understanding human life and the human world. That is to say, women, but not men, are often dealt with only as objects that have to be fitted into a scheme of things and only as objects which are exterior to mankind [sic] ... we are just beginning to learn how much our assumed generalized perspective expresses covertly an essentially masculine viewpoint. (Gross 1973: 124)

While Gross expresses some surprise at recognizing this practice, taking the human male as the human norm and ideal is nothing new. The ranking of human types is an ancient gesture, with citizens being given pre-eminence over “barbarians”, “freemen” over slaves, nobles over peasants. The ranking of persons by gender has an ancient legacy as well. As Thomas Laqueur (1990) has outlined at length, the ancient Western world produced a very clear ideology of gender which assumed a hierarchy in which the female was simply a less robust form of the male. More explicitly, women and men were homologous—made out of the same “stuff”—but women, lacking, amongst other things, sufficient “heat” to push their genitals outside of their bodies, remained inverted, deficient men. Maleness itself was a construct, as Maud Gleason (1990) has amply shown. Indeed, as Laqueur remarked,

the paradox of the one-sex model [of the classical era] is that pairs of ordered contraries played off a single flesh in which they did not themselves inhere. Fatherhood/motherhood, male/female, man/woman, nature/culture, masculine/feminine, honorable/dishonorable, legitimate/illegitimate, hot/cold, right/left, and many other such pairs were read into a body that did not itself mark these distinctions clearly. (Laqueur 1990: 61-62)

What is relevant is:

In a public world that was overwhelmingly male, the one-sex model displayed what was already massively evident in culture more generally: *man* is the measure of all things, and woman does not exist as an ontologically distinct category. Not all males are masculine, potent, honorable, or hold power, and some women exceed men in each of these categories. But the standard of the human body and its representations is the male body. (Laqueur 1990: 62)

That is, the ancient Western world acknowledged the construction of gender which presumed what Laqueur calls a “one sex/flesh” model in which the male was the human norm and ideal. This model provided the foundation for Western thinking about gender. It was further reinforced by Christian theological configurations which identified “woman” with Eve, a creature made after Adam, and whose deficiency (of reason, of morality) brought sin into the world and cast humanity out of paradise.

Clearly, the assertion of gender difference, and the hierarchical ranking which placed the male as the human norm and ideal, is a time-honored practice. Gross’ point, and that of others, however, is

that an exclusively masculine norm is an inadequate model from which to proceed. Focusing primarily or exclusively on the male as norm in scholarly inquiry limits our understanding of a fully human world. Moreover, it obscures the experiences of women, insofar as these differ from those of men. Nor is this an isolated observation. In "The human situation: A feminine view", first published in 1960, Valerie Saiving anticipates this position:

I am a student of theology; I am also a woman. Perhaps it strikes you as curious that I put these two assertions beside each other, as if to imply that one's sexual identity has some bearing on his [sic] theological views. I myself would have rejected such an idea when I first began my theological studies [1947]. But now, thirteen years later, I am no longer as certain as I once was that, when theologians speak of "man," they are using the word in its generic sense. It is, after all, a well-known fact that theology has been written almost exclusively by men. This alone should put us on guard, especially since contemporary theologians constantly remind us that one of man's strongest temptations is to identify his own limited perspective with universal truth. (Sailing 1979: 25)

She goes on to explore the implications of this gender imbalance in the writings of Christian theology, particularly with regard to the understanding of original sin. She concludes that, applied to men, thinking of original sin as "pride" or "will-to-power" makes sense; men's betrayal of the image of God within them is expressed in making too much of themselves. For women, however, reared in a culture of passivity and service to others, betrayal of the image of God within them occurs not with making too much of themselves but, rather, too little. It is not through pride, Saiving asserts, but rather through self-abnegation that "original sin" is manifested in women.

Carol Gilligan made similar observations about differences in male and female perspectives in *In a Different Voice* (1981). Challenging Laurence Kohlberg's hierarchy of moral development (based on studies in which American boys were the predominant subjects), Gilligan used a diverse female population to explore why females typically scored no higher than the "conventional" level (stages 3 and 4) in Kohlberg's six-stage schema. In an observation very similar to Saiving's, she concluded that to reach full moral maturity, men and women are faced with different moral tasks: men needed to learn to consider *others* as legitimate objects of moral concern, while women needed to learn to consider *themselves* as such. A pattern is thus emerg-

ing. So long as men and women are different (so the argument goes), ought not women be heard too if our knowledge base is to be reliable and accurate? These days this appeal no doubt sounds old and tedious, and indeed, it is not without its own problems. For example, Sandra Harding has drawn attention to the essentialism implied by Gilligan's position in "The curious coincidence of feminine and African moralities: Challenges for feminist theory", suggesting that there are other cultural frameworks—in this instance, African—which embody the values and orientation Gilligan identifies as "feminine". Moreover, we need to query the epistemological stance generated out of the European Enlightenment in its assumption of having sole possession of the means to generate reliable knowledge.¹

Citing Black American economist Vernon Dixon, she notes:

For Europeans, knowledge seeking is a process of first separating the observer (the self) from what is to be known, and then categorizing and measuring it in an impartial, disinterested, dispassionate manner. In contrast, Africans "know reality predominantly through the interaction of affect and symbolic imagery." The interaction of affect and symbolic imagery, in contrast to intuition, requires "inference from or reasoning about evidence." But in contrast to European modes of gaining knowledge, it refuses to regard as value-free what is known, or as impartial, disinterested, and dispassionate either the knower or the process of coming to know. (Harding 1987: 302)

Over against this construction, Africans and women share "a concept of the self as dependent on others, as defined through relationships to others, as perceiving self-interest to lie in the welfare of the relational context", rather than in the individual self. This perspective is then expressed in "epistemologies that conceptualize the knower as part of the known, the known as affected by the process of coming to know, and that process as one that unites manual, mental, and emotional activity" (Harding 1987: 303). Epistemologies of autonomy, in contrast, allow both a dissociation from self and a will to control which are deeply implicated in imperialism. In Harding's view, these congruence disrupt any simplistic gender differences which might be drawn.

¹ Those who find this an abrupt or startling conclusion will find this position fully articulated in Minnich (1990). For in-depth analyses, with bibliographies, of the impact of gender-critical approaches on the full range of academic disciplines over the last quarter century, see Kramarae and Spender (1992). For an illuminating study of an epistemological emphasis on "facts", see Poovey (1998).

However these differences are constructed, the problem of androcentrism remains. Why taking "Man" as the measure of all things is a problem is deftly illustrated by philosopher Elizabeth Minnich:

Consider the famous syllogism: "man is mortal. Socrates is a man. Therefore Socrates is mortal." Try it with a woman: "Man is mortal. Alice is _____" what? A man? Nobody says that, not even philosophers. "Man," the supposedly generic term, does not allow us to say, "Alice is a man." So we say, "Alice is a woman." Then, what are we to deduce? Therefore, Alice is _____" what? It is man, a supposedly universal category that is simultaneously neutral and masculine but *not* feminine ... who is "mortal." Is Alice, who is female and hence not in a category that is either neutral or masculine, then *immortal*? Is she mortal, insofar as, for the purposes of such reasoning, she may be subsumed under the category *man*, but not insofar as she is, specifically, female? Are women, then, immortal insofar as we are female? Alice ends up in the peculiar position of being a somewhat mortal, somewhat immortal, creature. Or, we must admit, we cannot thus reason about Alice while thinking about her as a female at all. We can think of Socrates as a man without derailing the syllogism; we cannot think of Alice as a woman. Reason flounders; the center holds, with Man in it, but it is an exclusive, not a neutral, center. (Minnich 1990: 59)

With maleness decentered, the most basic (apparently neutral) constructions reveal themselves to be enmeshed, not just in bias, but in logical absurdity.

Religious Studies prides itself on being a scientific discipline. From the time of F. Max Müller onward, the importance of comparative and non-confessional approaches to religion have been affirmed or, at least, held up as an ideal towards which scholars of religion ought to strive. Hence, it would be reasonable to assume that once scholars of religion were faced with evidence of omission or bias, the proper scientific response would be to say something along the lines of, "oh yes, sorry, now that we know the earth goes round the sun, not the reverse, let's rethink what we know and believe". That did *not* happen with regard to gender (though Müller's famous dictum might reasonably be paraphrased, "he who knows only one gender knows none"). Why not?

The responses range from a laudable caution in the face of paradigm breakdown (e.g., Thomas Kuhn) to moral outrage (e.g., Mary Daly). Underneath or behind these sit two related explanations. First, academics are experts, and they pride ourselves on their expertise. Persons whose entire scholarly lives have been built on a specific

body of materials and assumptions are understandably cautious about maximizing the significance of new information or perspectives which destabilize the paradigm. No one, quite reasonably, wants to hear “everything you know is wrong”. Moreover, persons whose work *would* be destabilized by gender critique tended to be those with the greatest authority in the academic system, occupying positions of sufficient power to neutralize the intellectual force of the critique. These are all plausible components of the situation, and indeed are obvious to anyone with a passing familiarity with feminist (or, for that matter, Marxist) analysis. However, I would like here to suggest a deeper reason for the otherwise quite spectacular lack of widespread analytical engagement with gender within the academic study of religion.

At the outset of this introduction, I addressed the gender ideology of the classical world within which men and women were assumed to be homologous creatures, with the male pre-eminent and the female a less developed, less robust version of the male. This perspective persisted throughout Western culture, with elements of it remaining into the current day. (Anyone who doubts this need only consider popular attitudes to men’s and women’s sports.) However, as Thomas Laqueur has illustrated at length, a new gender ideology began to emerge at the end of the eighteenth century, a result not of a change in the scientific knowledge base, but rather of changes in the social and political world of Europe.

The European Enlightenment, with its emphasis on the rational, autonomous individual to whom certain inalienable rights accrued, challenged social hierarchies based on divine ordinance. The “divine right of kings” fell before a republicanism which affirmed the equality of all citizens.² Just as the king/commoner distinction was challenged, so too were the hierarchical social relations between women and men, on the basis of their common possession of human reason. As Olympe de Gouges of France wrote in her “Declaration of the rights of women” in 1791:

Women awake! The tocsin [sic] of reason is being heard through the whole universe: discover your rights! The powerful empire of nature is no longer surrounded by prejudice, fanaticism, superstition and lies.

² This of course was not absolute. Who counted as a citizen was a serious issue, as the status of Jews in civil life demonstrated. However, the theological reason given for Jewish subordination was removed.

Courageously oppose the force of reason to the empty pretensions of superiority, unite yourselves. (de Gouges 1992: 24)

Though obviously the situation was not quite so consciously articulated, Euro-North American culture was left with a choice after its republican revolutions: it could either change male/female social relations in support of a new republican era of equality, or it could offer a different justification for existing gender relations hitherto explained in terms of male superiority and female inferiority. Although it was strongly contested, the second option prevailed. The new Romantic gender ideology came to be known as the doctrine of "separate spheres". Rather than being homologous, men and women were now conceived of as foundational opposites, each completing the other. Moreover, each had a "proper" sphere of activity. For the male, this was the public world of commerce and government, ably served by men's "natural" capacities for reason, objectivity, stamina, and competition. These masculine characteristics were also reflected in an ideology of scientific inquiry which posited a feminine Nature to be "penetrated" and "her secrets" wrested from her thereby. In contrast, in this account women were rightly placed in the private, domestic sphere, wherein they could best express their "natural" womanly capacities for nurturance, intuition, relationship, and love. Sexual purity, religious piety, domesticity, and submissiveness became the hallmark virtues of the "True Woman".

It is important to remember that this ideology of complementarity was at its height when *Religionswissenschaft* was born. It permeates the foundational assumptions of theorists of religion from Durkheim to Weber to Malinowski to Freud. Nor was this the only intellectual baggage the scientific study of religion carried, as it emerged within the context of a racialized, imperialist ethos (which, for example, made it completely plausible to think that anthropologists could go to "darkest Africa" to find out what white folks had been up to 5000 years ago before "we" evolved.) The projects and practices of *Religionswissenschaft* were framed from the very outset within a series of assumptions about humanity and the hierarchical evolutionary ranking of groups within it, all given credence by the overlay of "disinterested" science.³

³ Attention is beginning to be given to the role of imperialism in the study of religion (Chidester 1996), but much work remains to be done.

Within this larger ideological context, the simultaneous existence of two very different gender discourses provided a peculiar but nonetheless persuasive rationale to dismiss the kind of quite reasonable observations made by Rita Gross and others, on the ostensible grounds of “scientific objectivity”. Moreover it provided a warrant to cast Gross’ position and those of others as “advocacy” positions ruled out of court by this same “scientific objectivity”. Specifically, first, insofar as the male is taken as the human norm and ideal, studying females makes no sense, for this will only yield deficient, less significant, and potentially distorted results. To learn about the general case, one rightly studies “normal” subjects, not anomalies. Second, insofar as men and women are different, and the nature of that difference is understood in terms of a complementarity of public/private, reason/emotion, science/religion, and so on, insights and arguments from a woman-centered perspective will be scientifically dismissible as personal, emotional, and unreliable. Thus, there is a scientific reason not to study women (deficient results) and a reason to consider the non-androcentric study of women to be unscientific. Thoroughly enmeshed in the slippage between these two gender ideologies, the inability to recognize androcentrism thus was built into the very logic of *Religionswissenschaft* itself.

This leaves us with a series of issues and problems which have shaped religious studies’ recent history and our current scene (Warne 1998). First, there has been a *ghettoization* of religious studies work which takes women (or even gender) as its primary focus. Work on women is allowed now, but it is considered “women’s work”. Here we see the complementarity of “separate spheres” hard at work. Second, there has been an *exoticization* of the same. Women and religion are seen as a “special interest”, an “add-on” to supposedly neutral, “mainstream” studies. This carries especial irony when one considers the percentage of the world’s religious practitioners who are women. Third, this has produced a situation of non-reciprocal academic *bilingualism* within the scholarly community, wherein gender-critical scholars (usually women) have to be current in “their own” field as well as the “mainstream”. However, the reverse is not the case. No scholarly penalty accrues to androcentric scholars for being gender-blind in their research and teaching. Here we see the classical gender ideology, with its assumption that women are a less robust form of the (truly) human male, at work. Finally, there are the series of methodological problems cantering around such issues as the insider/out-

sider debate, the relationship of religious studies and theology, and “objectivity” versus situated knowledges. All these are profoundly gendered discourses but they are not acknowledged as such by those who assert an ethos of the “god’s-eye-view” over the “advocacy” of those who interrogate it.

All this leaves those who wish to challenge androcentrism in a curious and ultimately untenable position. They can either accept traditional constructions of gender in religious studies as scientifically sound and unproblematic, thereby accepting self-definitions grounded in and deployed via the dual gender ideologies noted above, or they can challenge those constructions on the grounds of experience and self-definition, leaving themselves open to charges of self-interest and self-advocacy. It is a great irony that the high ground of scientific objectivity is claimed by those who are most invested in a very specific Euro-North American masculine mode of its deployment.

Uncritical acceptance of naturalized notions of gender diminish the very claims to scientific rigor that the academic study of religion wishes to make. Religions use gender, sometimes strongly, sometimes weakly, as one of their means of articulating order; how and why that is done needs to be the subject of scholarly scrutiny. Moreover, as scholars, our own enmeshment in the cultural practices which construct and/or reinforce our positions in the world requires similar scrutiny. The “god’s-eye-view” is, in the end, much like the emperor’s new clothes. Reliable knowledge about the world cannot rest simply on the assertion that one is above its constraints.

The essays in this volume demonstrate the various forms which gender-critical scholarship in the academic study of religion may take. Susan Sered opens the collection with an anthropological exploration of the dynamics of agency and symbolic representation. “Religiously doing gender: The good woman and the bad woman in Israeli ritual discourse” illustrates how religious ritual and discourse create a symbolic order by and through which actual women are evaluated, and their actions enabled and/or constrained. The implications of postcolonialism and orientalism for the academic study of religion is the focus of Morny Joy’s “Postcolonial reflections: Challenges for religious studies”. Drawing from an impressive range of non-Western sources, Joy illustrates the intellectual urgency—as well as the moral necessity—of moving beyond the “self-authenticating narcissistic gaze” which has characterized Western scholarship, a call

all the more compelling for the comparative agenda that the academic study of religion claims.

Dawne McCance continues the critique of the “god’s eye-view” which has shaped so much of Western thought in her provocative reworking of the notion of “fetish” which introduces Jacques Waardenburg’s famous work, *Classical Approaches to the Study of Religion*. In addition to its specific subject, “The female and the fetish: A method and theory review” amplifies a number of elements alluded to in this introduction and echoed elsewhere in this volume’s various articles regarding the self-conception of Western scholars of religion. The challenges posed to foundational theoretical constructs in the study of religion by a gender-critical perspective is adeptly demonstrated in Brereton and Bendroth’s “Secularization and gender: An historical approach to women and religion in the twentieth century”. Using the case study of Ellen Glasgow (1873-1945), Brereton and Bendroth argue against simplistic notions of women’s “inherently” greater religious faith as signs of intellectual immaturity, suggesting, in contrast, that studying women’s “secularization” in the twentieth century is in fact an important key to understanding the persistence of religious belief in the modern age.

The volume concludes with a personal reflection by Rita Gross. “Passion and peril: Transgressing boundaries as a feminist scholar-practitioner” articulates that which much of academic life is set up to deny, namely, the profound political consequences of transgressing normative scholarly boundaries. Generating new knowledge is dangerous business. Contrary to the rhetoric about “the free play of the intellect” and “the academic marketplace” (within which ideas are evaluated by one’s peers on the strength of intellectual argument) we all know this is, at best, an ideal towards which some might strive. In reality, fields are driven by personalities and allegiances which, while not utterly devoid of a basis in intellectual merit, cannot be seen as independent of the workings of social power. Rita Gross had it right in 1972: androcentrism has limited and distorted the academic study of religion. However readers may respond to Gross’ personal account and interpretation, the underlying reality remains: material and political conditions of knowledge production in the academy are foundational to the generation of human knowledges (McCutcheon 1998).

In conclusion, I would like to thank the editors of *MTSR* (past and present) for inviting me to undertake this project. As an undergradu-

ate student in religious studies in the early 1970s I avidly awaited the grand methodological and theoretical transformation which I assumed would follow inevitably from the (simplistic) realization that "women are people too". Learning how they (and others) are not, and how those inequalities have been explained and justified by and within religions and by and within the study of religion(s), has occupied a considerable degree of my own scholarly life. Having a chance some quarter of a century later to draw together such premier examples of scholarship as are contained in this volume is both a deeply satisfying and somewhat humbling experience. It is my fervent hope that the fact this is a "special" issue of this journal will one day be truly puzzling to future generations of critical, scientific, and academic scholars of religion.

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