

# Religion and Reason

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# New Approaches to the Study of Religion

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## Gendering the History of Religions

by

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The concept of gender points to culturally produced differences between men and women. It covers a wide range of phenomena as well as a scholarly discourse. Gender is a battleground of meanings where biological determinism is confronted with cultural relativism. The distinction between the biologically given and the culturally conceived is a fundamental characteristic of gender as a critical category. In the last decade feminist scholars have criticized the sharp distinction between biological sex and socio-cultural gender, or the so-called sex/gender model, which has been so prominent in feminist theory. The model is attacked for being too heterosexually oriented, for repeating the split between nature and culture, for not reflecting how much the body is a cultural construct, and for neglecting the corporeal dimension of meaning construction.<sup>1</sup> However, such warranted critique does not nullify the fundamental insight that socio-cultural gender structures cannot be explained by biological sex, but have to be assessed as historical and linguistic creations.

Religion is a main factor when it comes to how gender differences are produced and realized in people's lives. Religious mediation of gender happens through the interpretation of myths and symbols, as well as in their ritual, ethical and organizational enactment. Religious teachings legitimize gender hierarchies in society and influence personal gender identity. Gender research in the history of religions is important in society at large because it contributes to our understanding of how divisions between men and women are sanctioned and at the same time demonstrates how religion may structure people's lives in fundamental respects.

Although sexuality has figured as a phenomenological category in the shape of *hieros gamos*, sacred intercourse, gender has not been a central concern in the history of religions, to be compared with for instance myth, ritual, concepts of divinity, all of them phenomenological topics considered to belong to

<sup>1</sup> Probably the most influential criticism of the sex/gender model has been launched by Judith Butler in her famous *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990). For recent overviews of different understandings of gender and discussions of religious studies in a critical gender perspective, see King 1995b; Morgan 1999; Warne 2000.

the very essence of religion. Instead, gender critique often subverts essentialist and metaphysical renderings of religion. In the same way, deconstructionist critique undermines the fixed gender dichotomies established by a great many religious traditions.

The critical category of gender entered the history of religions in the 1970s, in the wake of feminism. The category is rooted in feminist research and debates about gender difference.<sup>2</sup>

### The Feminist Impulse

The history of the present feminist trend in religious studies can be traced to the 1960s, when female scholars started to ponder how religion is involved in the repression of women and besides, how scholarship made their own sex invisible.<sup>3</sup> During the 1970s this kind of questioning intensified and became widespread. This happened in the wake of the growing feminist movement's identification of how women in different fields of life were suppressed. Structures and procedures in the academy that make women invisible or marginal were seen as part of the multi-structured repression of women in society.

2 The concept of feminism should be thought of as comprising a wide spectrum of political ideas and social activities. One may profitably speak of several feminisms in the modern era, see Offen 1988 and 2000; Morgan 1999: 43.

3 Gender-critical work on religion in the second half of the twentieth century started in Christian theological contexts: Valerie Saiving's essay "The Human Situation: A Feminine View" appeared in 1960; Mary Daly's *The Church and the Second Sex* was first published in 1968; Kari Elisabeth Børresen's dissertation about St. Augustine's and Thomas Aquinas' views on women, *Subordination et Equivalence: Nature et Rôle de la Femme 'après Augustin and Thomas d'Aquin* came out in 1968; George H. Tavard's *Woman in Christian Tradition* was published in 1973, and Rosemary Radford Ruether's seminal edition, *Religion and Sexism. Images of Woman in the Jewish and Christian Traditions*, was available in 1974.

In the 1970s feminist criticism of the Christian tradition was a debated topic in several European countries and quite a number of books in native languages came out. Some early examples from my own country are the Norwegian publications *Kvinnen i kirken. Teori og praksis* (1977) by Marit Lindheim Gundersen; *Kloke jomfruer? Om kirke, kristendom og kvinnefrigjøring* (1978) by many authors; *Fra kirkens kvinneside* (1979), a committee report. An early Swedish pioneer treating gender ideology in the history of ideas is Asta Ekenvall's book, *Manligt och kvinnligt. Idéhistoriska studier* (1966), which was read in all the Scandinavian countries.

In the history of religions Mildreth Worth Pinkham's *Woman in the Sacred Scriptures of Hinduism* (1967) is an investigation of woman's status in Hinduism; Judith Plaskow and Joan Arnold's anthology *Women and Religion* (1974), and Rita M. Gross' 1977 edition, *Beyond Androcentrism: New Essays on Women and Religion*, are early exponents of the new feminist critique.

Women's studies, feminist research and gender programs have since developed during the decades between 1970 and 2000. This field of inquiry is at the same time interdisciplinary and distinctive for various subjects. Similar types of criticism, questions and insight are echoed in history, philosophy, cultural studies, and social studies. Gender is a cross-disciplinary category covering several common agendas which influence more discipline-specific discussions and opinions. At the same time there exist different theories of gender and fields of interest and topics of investigation which are characteristic for disciplines and subjects. Women's history for instance, has hitherto shown little interest in religion.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, scholars from the history of religions and various theological disciplines, sharing a common interest in feminist topics, have collaborated and inspired each other. Generally sympathizing with the feminist movement, scholars have called for more focus on women's lives, experiences, and contributions to art, literature, religion, culture and society, besides demanding more female scholars in university departments. Fundamental questions about how the production of knowledge is affected by gender, race, and class have been discussed in these settings, with a view to integrate the stories of oppressed groups and understand the nature of their oppression. The topic of gender in a history of religions context must be understood in relation to this general situation.

Women's history, experience and products of many kinds have been at the center of attention for feminist scholars, and still even so-called gender studies mostly concentrate on women in one way or another. But from early on it was realized that a one-sided focus on women will not explain their status and allotted sphere of activity. The category of "woman" is culturally constructed in relation to the category of "man"; therefore women will have to be analyzed with a view to the social matrix which produces gender difference. In the 1970s the notion of gender became a framework in which socio-cultural differences between men and women were being conceptualized, and since then the concept has been in the center of feminist theorizing. One could imagine gender studies informed by other theoretical paradigms, but so far feminist discourse and feminist concerns have dominated in the humanities and social sciences. Research on men and masculinities, as well as the growing field of queer studies, are both deeply influenced by feminist thinking.<sup>5</sup>

4 The Swedish historian Inger Hammer has called women's history blind as regards the importance of religion, cf. Hammer 1998. Historical work on religion has tended, in North America at least, to be undertaken under the aegis of what has been called "Church History," although it has now tended to distance itself from its confessional roots.

5 As to men's studies in religion, see Daniel Boyarin, *Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture* (1993) and *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the*

## Gender

The scholarly concept of gender is often used indiscriminately and without any theoretical intent. This even happens in religious studies, where gender sometimes covers topics relating to gender ideology, sex roles, goddesses, and the position of women in religion, without any attempts at explaining the operations of gender difference. However, the reason why gender has become a vital field of interest is feminist theorizing, which has made gender into a poignant critical and analytical category.

When religion is viewed from a critical gender perspective, universalist notions about *homo religiosus* and the patterns of the sacred are replaced by critical queries about gendered power structures and oppressive discourses. Gender critique contributes to orientating the history of religions away from the old phenomenological paradigm where religion is treated as a separate, sacred area of life to be assessed in terms of comparative, religious categories, to a paradigm where religion becomes part of culture and is seen as interwoven with the motive powers and ordinary affairs of human beings in various historical settings.

However, gender has the merit that it is an open and unbounded category, inviting many types of analytical perspectives as well as including an endless variety of data. Its range of vision comprises men, and in contrast to a negatively laden concept like patriarchy, it does not foretell the character of the structures investigated. Patriarchy, usually understood as men's power over women and men of inferior status,<sup>6</sup> is obviously a frequent structure in the world of religion; still, research is better served with a general category which does not universalize and totalize women's oppression and thereby prevents observing the privileges, power and influence of women, which can be considerable, even in patriarchal contexts.

*Jewish Man* (1997); Lawrence Hoffman, *Covenant of Blood: Circumcision and Gender in Rabbinic Judaism* (1996).

The anthology *Que(e)rying Religion: A Critical Anthology* (1997), edited by Gary David Comstock and Susan E. Henking, is a rich and manifold contribution to religious queer studies.

- 6 Sue Morgan defines patriarchy as "an institutionalized system of male power and dominance over women, subject men and the natural world as a whole" (Morgan 1999: 43). Bryan Turner's definition locates patriarchy to the household: "By patriarchy I mean a system of political authority, based upon the household, in which dominant property-owning males control and regulate the lives of subordinate members of the household, regardless of their sex or age." According to Turner the primitive patriarchal system became linked to monarchical power, and in turn transposed to the religious sphere, when divinity became a supreme, fatherly ruler (Turner 1997: 26). "Sexism", the ideology of patriarchy, is defined by Morgan as "a series of beliefs that sustain and reinforce the notion of male supremacy" (Morgan 1999: 43).

Gender is both an emic and an etic category, pointing at the same time to a gendered human reality as well as to our scholarly understandings and analytical tools. Randi Warne has observed that gender is ubiquitous, but at the same time it has often been invisible as an analytic category.<sup>7</sup> The emic-etic duplicity which incidentally it shares with the category of religion, contributes in making gender a very intricate matter. Its heterogenous field of reference is another complicating factor. The lenses of gender can be directed towards large systems as well as minor elements in social existence. Gender may refer to the individual person with her/his body, actions, feelings, speech, and so on, as far as these elements are related to culturally established norms and meanings; it refers to social institutions, organizations and hierarchies, and to social discourse. Gender operates in different cultural circumstances and meaning-constructing processes, often in complex ways and intertwined with other agendas.<sup>8</sup>

Feminism argues that gender is interwoven with the social distribution of power, but scholarly approaches to gender do not always focus on the power aspect. However, to overlook the power element in the dynamics of gender construction may result in a very incomplete understanding indeed, in religion as in other areas. In fact, it can be argued that gender perspectives will not be able to fundamentally change the history of religions unless the relationship between religion and power is taken seriously. If this is going to happen, the concept of religion as *sui generis*,<sup>9</sup> as something uniquely spiritual and symbolic which should be assessed in a decontextualized fashion in order to bring out

7 Warne 2000: 141.

8 Randi Warne has presented a catalogue of the strategies and operations to which gender is subject and which may be combined in different cultural circumstances:  
*ontologizing* – ascribing to the level of Being;  
*essentializing* – positing as an essential (eternal) defining characteristic;  
*cosmologizing* – ascribing to a cosmic order;  
*naturalizing* – making something "natural", that is, free from (humanly constructed) conventions;  
*reifying* – converting something mental to a thing, that is, materializing;  
*authorizing* – sanctioning, giving authority;  
*valorizing* – imputing value;  
*idealizing* – exalting to perfection or excellence;  
*normalizing* – establishing as a rule, setting up a standard by which to judge deviation;  
*pathologizing* – naming as a disorder;  
*problematizing* – making into a problem requiring or implying a solution (Warne 2000: 141).

9 Compare the following citation from Eliade's *Patterns in Comparative Religion*: "... a religious phenomenon will only be recognized as such if it is grasped at its own level, that is to say, if it is studied as something religious. To try to grasp the essence of such a phenomenon by means of physiology, psychology, sociology, economics, linguistics, art or any other study is false; it misses the one unique and irreducible element in it – the element of the sacred" (Eliade 1967: xiii).

the "purely religious" will have to be abandoned, as Rosalind Shaw convincingly argues in her essay "Feminist Anthropology and the Gendering of Religious Studies" (1995). Naturally religion (in some form or another) will be the central concern of the history of religions, but the main crux is to locate religion not as isolated from, but interwoven with other cultural processes and social formations.

Research cannot be done according to the principle of sexual equality, and a disproportionate emphasis on male religious elites and their creations may often be unavoidable. From a gender-conscious perspective however, the relevance of gender is not limited to the study of women. How the constitution of elites and male dominance in religion is related to the construction of masculinity is perhaps the key question in religious gender studies. On the other hand, a "perspective from below,"<sup>10</sup> focusing on lay people and folk traditions, will often be necessary if women's participation in religion is to be fully accounted for.

Feminist gender discourse even highlights power relations within the academy, like the power of established scholars to define what are the interesting topics and established standards of good research. Historian of religions Ursula King is not the only one who has been told that publications about feminism are not academically respectable.<sup>11</sup>

To sum up: The term gender covers a broad range of phenomena as well as a scholarly concept. Some of the main features of gender as an analytical category may be summarized as follows: 1) a distinction is drawn between biological and cultural genderedness; 2) gender is conceived as relational: there is a mutual dependence between masculinity and femininity, women must be understood in relation to men and vice versa; 3) the concept points to processes and structures (linguistic, ideological, religious, economic, legal) producing social asymmetry between men and women; and 4) gender is often thought of as a system, with levels of meaning structures interacting with and upholding each other.

While gender-related phenomena always have been studied in the history of religions, former descriptions generally lacked the critical, gender-conscious perspective typical of the last thirty years.

### Gender and Religion: An Endless Variety of Data

Gender perspectives in religious studies have rich empirical material upon which to draw. Practically every aspect of religion can be analyzed from this analytical vantage point. Myths, symbolism, rituals, theological systems, ethics,

10 Shaw 1995.

11 King 1995: 25.

religious history, religious organizations, individual biographies, religious identity and experience all have important gender dimensions. In religion, conceptions of human gender become integrated in mythic dramas and cosmological visions. This wider web of opinions and symbolism, involving superhuman beings and often salvific messages, is the foremost characteristic of gender in a religious context. Human gender structures are reflected by gendered divinities and their actions, which again influence the discourse about human gender. Such dialectics between human and divine levels is very often the key to gender structures in religious organizations. Most religions constitute gender systems, specifying some sort of difference between the sexes, but varying as to the character and implementation of this difference. Besides, religious discourse is very often authoritative and absolute, and this feature also seems quite typical of religious attitudes to human gender.

Within religious frameworks, some gender topics are particularly prominent and influential. Tales about the creation of humanity, the so-called anthropogony myths, often represent a normative anthropology, delineating as they do the position of human beings in terms of their relations to divinities. Such stories frequently say something about gender hierarchies at the time they were produced. Their impact through long-lasting periods of time can be immense. The importance in the West of the Jewish-Christian creation myths and the story of Adam and Eve's relationship and fall can hardly be exaggerated. Since the time of Paul the Apostle, the drama has constantly been pondered and reinterpreted in Church history, from the Gnostic inversions of its biblical content to present-day feminist rereadings.<sup>12</sup>

The biblical foundation for female inferiority in the West was hotly debated in the nineteenth century, and it was highlighted by American feminist Elizabeth Cady Stanton and her collaborators when they published *The Women's Bible* in 1895 and 1898. The book is a commentary on biblical passages dealing with women. In this controversial work, which soon became a best-seller, the androcentrism of scriptural interpretation was exposed. The momentous two volume commentary edited by feminist theologian Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza in 1993 and 1994, *Searching the Scriptures*, is deliberately situated by the editor in the interpretative tradition of *The Women's Bible*.

The biblical coupling of sexuality and gender hierarchy demonstrates the centrality of sexuality in gender matters. Sexuality is an age-old, major theme in religion, symbolized in myths and celebrated in *hieros gamos* rituals. Procreation can be a sacred affair, sometimes involving gods and humans in the act, as is demonstrated by Christian dogma about Jesus Christ. However, religion is equally known for making sexuality a problem, to be regulated, mastered and

12 See Bird 1995; Boyarin 1998; Carr 1993; Gilhus 1983; Mikaelsson 1980; Phillips 1985; Ricoeur 1969; Trible 1978.

possibly avoided in lives of ascetism and celibacy. Gender boundaries are also at issue. Myths and symbols sometimes contain ideas of spiritual and bodily androgyny, and ritual castration is practiced in several traditions, thus the symbolic vision of what human gender purports is magnified.

Religious symbolism is extremely important in most societies, and symbolism is a constant source when it comes to cultural construction and reconstruction of gender. However, such general importance does not give us a clue to a general meaning or function of gendered symbols. Caroline Walker Bynum has emphasized the multivocality of symbols, and she has frequently been cited because of the following reminder:

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?<sup>13</sup>

Bynum has criticized Victor Turner's influential theory of liminality and dominant symbols for being formulated from a male point of view.<sup>14</sup> On the basis of her research on spirituality in the European Middle Ages, more particularly the medieval narrative of the saint's life, Bynum argues that women's images and symbols do not invert or elevate them, as Turner's theorizing would predict; rather, their symbols emphasize continuity with the women's ordinary life experience. Bynum concludes that Turner's theory of religion is based (more than he probably was aware) on a particular form of Christianity that has been characteristic of male educated and aristocratic elites in the Western tradition, with its emphasis on world denial and inversion of images. In contrast to Turner, Bynum suggests that inferiors in society generally do not create images of reversal or elevation, and that liminality itself might be an escape for "those who bear the burdens and reap the benefits of a high place in the social structure."<sup>15</sup>

An intriguing question relates to the effects of divine gender. Religiously minded feminists in the West naturally find it unacceptable that Judaism and Christianity have more or less excluded the feminine from their concepts of divinity. Identification with the sacred symbol then becomes a male prerogative, a mythical sexism giving rise to questions concerning the relations between misogyny and symbolism. Everyone in this field must have heard the

13 Bynum 1986: 2–3.

14 Bynum 1992.

15 Bynum 1992: 32–34.

trumpet-call of former theologian Mary Daly's lacerating critique of God the Father, which she designates as male idolatry, and diagnoses as a keystone in the theological and social misogyny.<sup>16</sup> Admittedly, it seems highly justified to examine possible correlations between exclusive, divine maleness and oppression of women in religious organizations and societies. Yet, whatever Western goddess worshippers in our time might presume, there is no general evidence supporting the belief that goddess symbols guarantee a better position for women in the societies where they are venerated.

The fact that all the major world religions are male dominated should not blind us to the fact that women sometimes do play leading parts in religion. In modern times we have several examples of women as founders of new religious movements, and the connections between the nineteenth century wave of feminism and movements like spiritualism and theosophy on the one hand and the Christian missionary movement on the other, is a fascinating, interdisciplinary topic which is very far from being exhausted.<sup>17</sup> Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–1891), founder of the Theosophical Society and author of modern esoteric classics *Isis Unveiled* (1877) and *The Secret Doctrine* (1888), has become one of the most important religious leaders in the modern period through the lasting influence of her ideas in various theosophical offshoots and the New Age movement.<sup>18</sup>

The general topic of women and religion has occasioned a great many conferences and publications, drawing women from different disciplines and with various religious persuasions among them. Feminist theology is a vital branch of scholarship, demonstrated by the many well-known contributions by scholars like Rosemary Radford Ruether and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. An early landmark of feminist cooperation is the anthology *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion*, edited in 1979 by Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow, with contributions by historians of religions, theologians, witches and goddess-worshippers. *Womanspirit Rising* contains several seminal essays, among them the editors' introduction, Carol P. Christ's arguing in favor of the goddess symbol for women in "Why Women Need the Goddess: Phenomenological, Psychological, and Political Reflections," and theologian Valerie Saiving's 1960 pioneer essay "The Human Situation: A Feminine View," where she argues that the standard Christian interpretation of sin as pride or will-to-power does not fit with women's experience, which rather points to underdevelopment or negation of self as more typical feminine forms of sin. As recently as in 1996 Rita Gross characterizes *Womanspirit Rising* as "probably the

16 Daly 1973.

17 See Brouwer 1990; Okkenhaug 2003; Owen 1989; Dixon 2001; Huber/Lutkehaus 1999; McFadden 1999.

18 Hanegraaff 1996; Kraft 1999.

single most influential and widely used book in the field of feminist studies in religion."<sup>19</sup> In 1989 the same editors (changing their order) published a sequel to *Womanspirit Rising*, called *Weaving the Visions: Patterns in Feminist Spirituality*, which has also gained a wide-spread reputation. Ursula King's *Religion and Gender* (1995), is a similar type of publication, a woman-centered anthology dominated by feminist perspectives and including several essays dedicated to present-day Western women's spirituality and worship of the goddess. The impact of these volumes are therefore not just scholarly; they also nourish feminist spirituality and religious self-reflexion. Topics to be pondered by religious feminists include God-language and renamings of the sacred, gender inclusive language, ecological spirituality, and retrieval of women's religious history.

Whatever some people might like to think, attention to gender is not a diminishing trend in religious scholarship. New introductory books contain chapters about gender, thus proving the centrality of this issue.<sup>20</sup> Monographs and anthologies have come out since the 1970s and new ones are continually being produced.<sup>21</sup> It also has to be emphasized that scholarship in this field comprises far more than works written in English. Increasing internationalization and its foregrounding of English and North American scholarship reflects a power dimension which is also evident in religious studies scholarship on gender.

19 Gross 1996: 48.

20 See Boyarin 1998; Morgan 1999; Warne 2000.

21 Compare the following publications in English, which by the way document the continuous focusing on women and the feminine in this literature: Pat Holden, ed., *Women's Religious Experience* (1983); Clarissa W. Atkinson/Constance H. Buchanan/Margaret R. Miles, eds., *Immaculate and Powerful: The Female in Sacred Image and Social Reality* (1985); Ursula King, ed., *Women in the World's Religions, Past and Present* (1987); Arvind Sharma, ed., *Women in World Religions* (1987); Nancy Auer Falk/Rita M. Gross, eds., *Unspoken Worlds: Women's Religious Lives* (1989); Paula M. Coeoy/William R. Eakin/Jay B. McDaniel, eds., *After Patriarchy: Feminist Transformations of the World Religions* (1992); Jean Holm/John Bowker, eds., *Women in Religion* (1994); Arvind Sharma, *Religion and Women* (1994) and *Today's Woman in World Religions* (1994); Kari Elisabeth Børresen, ed., *The Image of God: Gender Models in Judaeo-Christian Tradition* (1995); Ria Kloppenborg/Wouter Hanegraaff, eds., *Female Stereotypes in Religious Traditions* (1995); Rita M. Gross, *Feminism and Religion: An Introduction* (1996); Wendy Doniger, *Splitting the Difference: Gender and Myth in Ancient Greece and India* (1999); Darlene M. Juschka, *Feminism in the Study of Religion. A Reader* (2001). Judith Plaskow's *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective* (1991) and Rita M. Gross, *Buddhism after Patriarchy* (1993) are feminist reconstructions from a believer's point of view. Feminist gender research on Islam has been carried out since the 1970s, for example the voluminous anthology *Women in the Muslim World* (1978), edited by Lois Beck and Nikki Keddie. Later works include Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam* (1992), and Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad/John L. Esposito, eds., *Islam, Gender and Social Change* (1998).

On the other hand, it is not necessarily a given that gender-critical approaches are included in religious studies, even when their relevance is evident. The fifteen volume *Encyclopedia of Religion*, published in 1987 with Mircea Eliade as general editor, has been criticized for its lack of interest in feminist and/or gender-related topics. Only two articles of this kind are included in this major work.<sup>22</sup> According to Ursula King, who has critically perused the *Encyclopedia of Religion*, only about 17 per cent of the contributors are women (approximately 227 out of a total of 1356), a stark reminder of the male dominance of the discipline.<sup>23</sup>

One need not be a feminist or a specialist in gender research to find the gender dimension of religious phenomena interesting and include it in one's research. Many practitioners in this field focus on gender only in some of their projects, and then not necessarily making it a main concern. Neither is female sex a requirement, though it has to be admitted that most gender researchers are women. However, male scholars like Friedrich Heiler, David Kinsley, Geoffrey Parrinder, Arvind Sharma and Daniel Boyarin have made significant contributions to this field during the period of our study.

## Homo Religiosus

Who lacks gender, age, class or race, but is all the same a male and belongs to an elite? The answer is the famous *homo religiosus*—religious man—as this concept has had a tendency to be constructed by historians of religions.

*Homo religiosus*—a variety of the generic masculine, which identifies the male with the human—represents the very quintessence of the discipline's problematic treatment of gender. In the first place *homo religiosus* has all too often been construed as *vir religiosus*, neglecting *femina religiosa*. Men's leading part in religious history has somehow emerged as a matter of course, while women have been construed as subordinate, minor, or even invisible characters. To a considerable degree women have been overlooked as religious actors and co-producers of religious worlds. There is reason to ask if scholars have made religious traditions more male-centered than they really are. In feminist discourse the common term for such distortion and one-sidedness is *androcentrism*. Rita Gross, an early critic of androcentrism in religious studies,<sup>24</sup> defines it in the following manner:

22 Constance H. Buchanan, "Women's Studies," and Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Androcentrism."

23 King 1995c: 235–40.

24 Gross 1974; 1977; 1987; 1996.

Briefly stated, androcentrism is a tendency to think and write as if men represent the normal, ideal, and central kind of human, whereas women are somehow peripheral and marginal to that norm. Androcentrism pretends that humanity contains only one gender, so that one might readily speak of androcentrism as a "one-sex model of humanity" ... Far more information is collected about men than about women, what men do is usually deemed more interesting and important than what women do, and society or religion is described as if it were solely the possession and creation of men.<sup>25</sup>

*Homo religiosus* implicitly understood as *vir religiosus* reflects a Western *doxa* of representative and primary maleness rooted in age-old paradigms. In the biblical Paradise narrative (Gen. 2:3), several motifs cooperate in presenting the male, Adam, as the primary human being. He is created first, and he is the bodily basis for the woman, Eve, when she is made of his rib. Adam's superiority is stressed in the important asymmetry of naming, when he pronounces the woman's names on a par with his naming the animals, while she silently submits to this act of subjugation. The motif can be said to epitomize men's exclusive right to shape the world under patriarchy, including the centering of the male sex while rendering women as "the other."<sup>26</sup> The idea of male primacy can also be related to how Christianity has combined gender and salvation. In antiquity salvation was seen as a realization of the spiritual essence in man [sic], which implied the denigration or renouncement of body and sexuality. The spiritual man that was saved by Christ was thought to be male, but somehow this maleness included women. If the Christian woman lived a celibate life, she became a spiritual male. This metaphor of sex change and transcendent androgyny was quite common in early Christian texts,<sup>27</sup> and the idea of the body-rejecting (male) androgyne has since been a powerful concept in Western religion. It entails a hierarchy of gender which allows the male to represent the female, but not the other way round.

From a postcolonial and poststructural point of view *homo religiosus*, even when *femina religiosa* is subsumed, must be dismissed as anything but an empty category. The questions *What is religious woman?* and *What is religious man?* cannot have any other universal import than a person who is sometimes preoccupied with religious matters. The moment *homo religiosus* is defined in terms of belief in divinities, piety, membership in religious organizations, ritual behavior, gender dichotomies or reaction to a *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, *homo religiosus* has been essentialized in a way that bears the marks of a Western, Christian heritage. The androcentrism and parochialism that can be identified in many renderings of *homo religiosus* illustrate the poststructuralist

25 Gross 1987: 38.

26 Mary Daly suggests that the story is a paradigm of how the power of naming has been stolen from women in Western culture (Daly 1973: 8).

27 Meeks 1974; Vogt 1995; Boyarin 1998.

lesson that universalist discourse carries with it (hidden) negations and representations. Also, the emphasis of difference in poststructuralism is most valuable in its problematizing of simple gender dichotomies as analytical tools. Contrasting *vir religiosus* and *femina religiosa* in a fixed or absolute manner is no better than defining *homo religiosus* as a pious creature. To overlook how class, race, ethnicity, education, time period, and so on, are factors creating differences within categories like "Christian man" or "Hindu woman" is no longer acceptable.

On this point, feminist criticism of the history of religions echoes a great many voices in other disciplines. Like the concept of gender, the concept of androcentrism is interdisciplinary. Androcentrism should be thought of as an institutionalized approach in scholarship, a paradigm of knowledge construction reflecting academic *doxa*. Women scholars may consequently be as androcentric as their male colleagues, and the latter group should not be accused of androcentrism just because of their sex.

### Analytical Moves

Thus far, the fundamental change connected with feminism in religious scholarship is that women have become central objects of study. This development has contested hegemonic understandings of religious history and multiplied religious subjects worthy of attention. The centrality of women is brought out in many ways, i.e. in highlighting goddess symbols and images of femininity in sacred texts, in studying women's religious roles and status, in listening to women's religious experience, in investigating their religious activities and retrieving their religious history. Since androcentric descriptions of women have been content to elicit men's views on them, or to repeat religious or cultural stereotypes of femininity, inserting women's voices in religious history is an essential and necessary epistemological move. It is still a most important motive power in religious scholarship.

Experience, including the researcher's own experience, has been a critical point of departure for scholars in various disciplines. Its status and import is a fundamental feminist issue. In *Womanspirit Rising*, Carol Christ and Judith Plaskow relate it to women's consciousness-rising groups in the 1970s, where women learned to recognize and discuss their shared experiences. To these authors, the feminist naming of women's experience becomes the contrast to Adam's naming in the Genesis myth, and signifies a fundamental transformation of culture and religion.<sup>28</sup> The methodological import of subjective experience was acknowledged by Valerie Saiving when she used her own female experience as basis for criticism of male theologians' interpretations of

28 Christ/Plaskow 1979: 6-7.



the human situation. Judith Plaskow ascertains that women's experience is "the fundamental feminist methodological move."<sup>29</sup> Sue Morgan succinctly summarizes the centrality of women's experience as "the essential interpretative horizon of the feminist approach" which has "transformed both the subject of religious enquiry and the method of research."<sup>30</sup> However, following the argument of historian Joan Scott in a recent essay, it can be objected that experience cannot be the origin of explanation or be used out of hand as authoritative evidence, experience is vital, but it needs to be explained and historicized.<sup>31</sup>

Feminist identity politics related to experience has sometimes taken the shape of a universalizing discourse. Something of this sort can be seen in feminist theology, compare Marsha Hewitt's and Rosalind Shaw's attack on Carol Christ's "theology" and her appropriation of the experience of women in other times and places.<sup>32</sup> The well-known critique from women of color and women from non-Western cultures who refuse the idea of a common women's experience defined by Western, white feminists, is as relevant in religious scholarship as in other disciplines.

Still, experience is a fundamental matrix for interpretation and common understanding, also in comparative studies. The analytical potential of a comparative approach to gender was realized early on by Rita Gross. On the basis of her research on Australian religion, Gross sensibly advised scholars to look for parallel, male and female traditions of religious experience and activity, maintaining that Western scholars overlooked women's rituals and often made non-Western religions more male-centered than they really are. Ascertaining that women are excluded from men's rituals is not enough. Scholars should have in mind that there might exist patterns of mutual inclusion and exclusion between the sexes, treating males and females as co-equally modes of the human. Her ideas have been successfully applied by Richard Natvig in his investigation of the spirit possession zar-cult, which is dominated by women. Zar is not accepted by normative Islam, but it is an important folk tradition in several Middle-Eastern and Northeast-African countries, and the women themselves maintain that practicing zar is part of their Islamic identity. The zar-cult therefore demonstrates that men and women realize the Islamic religious universe in gender-differentiated ways.<sup>33</sup>

Gender in the history of religions may profitably be seen as a system, in the way suggested by Joan Scott in her by now classical essay "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis" (1986). Scott maintains that as a constitutive part of social relations, gender involves four elements systematically interacting

29 Plaskow 1991: 12.

30 Morgan 1999: 50.

31 Scott 1998: 6.

32 Hewitt 1993; Shaw 1995.

33 Natvig 1988; 1989.

with each other, i.e. cultural symbols, normative concepts, institutions and organizations, and lastly, subjective identity. While Scott thinks this model has a very wide application, it is especially relevant in the history of religions when analyzing gender in religious organizations. Churches, societies, sects and cults are usually ideologically based on theological, normative interpretation of myths and symbols, and implement their ideas in organizational structures, while members absorb the same ideas in their personal identity construction. Scott points out that symbols are socially important because they create identification with institutions, a fact widely attested by religion. In many cases rather rigid and stable gender dichotomies are produced through religious systems. However, a great analytical advantage of such a model is its categorical emptiness; it points to interconnected levels and processes, without predicting the character and content of a specific, historical gender system. Also, it is not presupposed that all four elements are equally important in all cases, or that the gender system will necessarily be consistent. On the contrary, one should expect paradoxes, suppressed ideas, and inconsistencies along with normative versions. A great advantage of such a model is that men and women are subjected to the same analytical perspective.

A most important development is the focus on the body (in both feminist and other quarters) which is cross-disciplinary, theoretically advanced, and attracting both male and female scholars.<sup>34</sup> In different branches of knowledge the gendered body has lost its character as a natural, fixed or universal datum of physicality. Instead it is conceived as an embodied self or a socially constructed artefact, the locus or intersection of various types of symbolism, discursive processes and social development. Crucial Western dualisms of flesh/spirit, body/soul, mind/matter are undeniably gendered; the association of female with flesh, moral weakness, and irrationality and male with spirit, moral strength, and rationality has had a long history in the Western world. In analysis focussed on the body such dualisms are seen as inscribed on the body; symbols and dogmas are accompanied by bodily transformations and regulations of diet, appearance, clothing, sexuality and movement; ideas of transcendence and sanctification are linked up with corporeal contrasts of defilement and decay. The wider context of such religious and cultural structures are social power systems: the family, the state, the economic system, the Church. The body becomes enmeshed in a complex web of cultural discourse and social structure. At the same time this kind of analysis makes room for the subject and its sexuality, desires, and strivings for self and identity. When

34 The literature on the body is enormous. See Coakley 1997 for a splendid anthology of religion and the body. Caroline Walker Bynum has become widely known for her work on gender and the body in Medieval spirituality, see particularly her *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (1992).

gender is inserted in this type of approach, it becomes as complex, problematized and polysemic as the body.

### Feminist Spiritual Agendas and Scholarly Approaches

Prominent women researchers have argued that scholarship on gender and religion deeply involves them as spiritual subjects. Several feminist historians of religions have been drawn to the goddess movement, most notably Carol P. Christ.<sup>35</sup> Ursula King asks for a feminist study of religion involving "participatory hermeneutics," which produces new consciousness and new attitudes. In her opinion the feminist approach "elicit more empathetic involvement and personal concern in relation to one's studies,"<sup>36</sup> and she criticizes the ideals of objectivity and neutrality in the discipline, which in her view run counter to an alleged feminist paradigm shift.

Such enthusiasm is understandable, but nevertheless problematic, and the goddess spirituality professed by feminist scholars has probably made it easier for some to ignore the import of their overall critique. Feminist theology and spirituality has definitely been a significant branch of gender studies in the history of religions, but one may well ask if emphasis on researchers' religious subjectivity and demands for major changes in religion have worked against a general feminist paradigm shift in the discipline. Our discipline's traditional skepticism towards letting theological agendas, value commitments and subjective involvement determine research is deeply grounded, has stood its test for many decades, and is not likely to be fundamentally changed by feminist appeals or utopian visions. It is highly debatable whether critical insight into the gendered, local and temporal situatedness of research should be seen as an invitation to mingle one's scholarly, religious or existential concerns. The separation between personal involvement and professional outlook in scholarship is a porous, changeable line, in need of constant critique and reflection, but the intellectual and methodological value of such a distinction should not be underrated. A strong personal interest in the subject matter can indeed be a great resource in scholarship, but the quality of research and scholarly texts will nevertheless depend on theory and methodology. Actually there is no reason why gender research, even when fuelled by feminism, should not thrive in the discursive space typical of the history of religions, i.e. the combination of the methodological empathy and religious non-involvement displayed by so many of the discipline's practitioners.

35 Christ 1979, 1997.

36 King 1995: 26–28.

Gender studies in the history of religions today are characterized by a pluralism of epistemological and methodological approaches. They may be woman-centered, man-centered, inclusive of both genders, or be more comprehensive, investigating the wide ramifications of engenderment and polysemic meaning construction in different types of religious and social phenomena. Feminist separatism, essentialism and theological reconstruction exist side by side with deconstructionist analyses of cultural undertakings and religious categories. One can hardly say that feminist perspectives have become a common horizon in the history of religion, but one may safely declare that gender is on its way to being established as a fundamental category of analysis and an integrated topic in many areas of research. If wide-ranging gender analyses still are few in number, it is increasingly being recognized that gender and religion is a field inviting a host of vital questions.

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