

From *Women and Religious Traditions*,  
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## INTRODUCTION

Leona M. Anderson and Pamela Dickey Young

Many years ago, upon discovering how underrepresented women are in texts for the study of religious traditions, we decided to begin developing and teaching courses in Women and Religion. In the usual portrayals of religion, we found, women are notable by their absence. *Women and Religious Traditions* seeks to remedy that. It has grown out of our experience in teaching, and is intended to be a resource for instruction in both World Religions, and Women and Religion.

This book is divided into chapters that each explore an important religious tradition. Each could be used separately as an introduction to the issues concerning women and their roles within the tradition discussed. In addition, we have included two thought-provoking case studies to encourage and foster discussion of specific situations. We hope that *Women and Religious Traditions* will provide an introduction to the subject that will furnish the reader with enough background and direction to encourage further work on women in religious traditions.

Having said that, it is not self-evident how *religion* ought to be defined. Even the scholarly construction of specific religious traditions is a particularly westernized idea. It grows out of a Christian-informed imperialistic view that often classifies religions in categories that best fit Christianity and only more tenuously fit other traditions. Despite this, there is much usefulness in examining religious traditions and how women are perceived and treated within the structure of those traditions.

Winston L. King (1987, 1995: 285) says that 'Religion is the organization of life around the depth dimensions of experience—varied in form, completeness and clarity in accordance with the enviroing culture'. The notion of 'depth dimension' is useful here; it allows us to focus our attention on the way 'religious' people conceive of and organize the totality of their world such that these conceptions and organizations provide structure for understanding and responding to the universe. Religions attempt to deal especially with the most



puzzling of human questions and predicaments, including issues such as the existence of evil or the inevitability of death, and provide a means to deal with these concerns. Religions provide symbol systems—that is, particular ways to understand and portray what is thought to be Ultimate. Frequently there is a central symbol or symbols—for example, god(s) or goddess(es) or both, nirvana, and the Dao. Religion also often employs myths, poetry, or metaphor, rather than direct description, to evoke the ultimate quality of what it is attempting to embody. Sometimes these symbols, myths, and metaphors are found in sacred texts, sometimes they are passed on through oral traditions. Religion regularly uses rituals as a means to bring the participant into contact with whatever is conceived as Ultimate and to hold at bay the chaotic forces of the universe. Often, religions identify sacred places or endow certain objects with sanctity. Historically, religion has been communal; but in the modern western world, at least, people tend more and more to individualize belief and practice in order to deal with this 'depth dimension'.

King also draws attention to the notion of the 'environing culture'. It is important to understand the vast diversity of forms taken by even a single religious tradition over time, in various geographical settings and even in specific individual and/or communal contexts. No 'religion' or religious tradition is a monolith. It is helpful here also if we make a distinction between the 'official' way that religious traditions present themselves and the host of 'unofficial' forms that traditions take. While the 'official' form often dominantly or exclusively presents males in positions of action and authority, there may well be other faces or presentations that understand women as important actors or authority figures.

Religions often include bodies of mythology. Myth here is understood to function as a vehicle to convey meaning about the world, about our place within the world, and about a particular conception of the Ultimate. Mythology, however, is a complex and polysemic system of constructing meaning, and individual myths are continuously reconfigured in response to changing circumstances. We are not, in this volume, engaged in the quest for the 'authentic' version of any particular myth. On the contrary, we are interested in the way myths have privileged male experience in the past, and how, in the present, they are being rewritten to include female experience.

The category 'women' is not itself an uncontested one. In feminist work there has historically been a distinction drawn between biological sex (male-female) and gender. The latter, gender, is understood to reflect social constructions of ways to act properly based on one's given maleness or femaleness. For many years now, feminist theory has argued that the gender roles that men and women are assigned to play out in their lives are malleable; they are constructed and hence can be reconstructed in other ways. Recently some

scholars have begun to argue that not only gender roles, but also sex itself is socially constructed. The fact that we tend to separate males from females as a sorting device and on that basis build whole societies is itself a construction rather than a necessity (Delphy 2001). Of course there are different reproductive roles—but why has so much rested on the difference (even opposition) of those roles, rather than on other biological categories such as eye colour, age and the like?

In many, perhaps most, religious traditions, sex and gender have been seen as basically synonymous. One is ascribed a certain gender role on the basis of an essentialized view of one's biological sex. Thus one's biological sex becomes the marker for assigning particular gendered religious and moral roles and expectations. Within many religious traditions in the contemporary world there has been some movement on the front of the reconstruction of gender roles, as, for example, the ordination of women in most Protestant Christian churches and in liberal Judaism. Despite this, there has been virtually no recognition of how most religious traditions rely on and employ the supposed 'bedrock' of biological sex to provide categories and concepts on which much doctrine, practice, and belief is based. Nor has there been much recognition of the implications thereof. Thus the whole notion of 'sex' remains highly bifurcated as male and female, and treated as a 'given', whether as a mandate from god or as a general presupposition about the universe. In addition to bifurcation and ossification of the roles, rights, and privileges of men and women, this essentialized stance also influences how religious symbols are seen and interpreted: the 'maleness' of the god of western monotheistic traditions, for example, or the interactions of the gods and goddesses of Hinduism. This leaves unexamined how 'sex' itself is socially constructed and imbued with meaning and cultural import.

In *Women and Religious Traditions*, given the current discussions on sex and gender, we do not assume that the category 'women' is necessarily constructed on a bedrock of biological essentialism. Rather, we use the category of 'women' as a way to pinpoint certain issues in the study of religion that are often neglected. We focus on certain ways of seeing 'women' as a category and explore the implications of religious systems that treat men and women differently. We note that typically men have been ranked higher than women in a variety of ways. We read various religious traditions through the category 'women' to discover and highlight features of these religions that have often been ignored. At the same time, we acknowledge that the term *women* is multivalent and context-dependent, and that one cannot speak to or for all women.

We assume that patriarchy is evident in many historical times and places and that religious traditions have, for the most part, been permeated by social systems (and have sometimes permeated social systems) with views that not



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only exalt maleness over femaleness but also mete out societal and religious privileges (for example, wealth, power, and influence) on the basis of male privilege. Patriarchal systems are social systems that elevate males and those roles attached to maleness, over females. Patriarchal systems are those that, to greater or lesser degree, render women's voices and experiences inconsequential and invisible. Patriarchy is not the only form of privilege, however, and is often intertwined with other sorts of privilege that exalt some people and diminish others on the basis of race, class, and sexual orientation.

Due to Rosemary Radford Ruether's (1972) astute analysis of 'dualisms' within Christianity, feminist critics of religion from a very early stage noted the parallel between the way in which the male over female dualism informed the dualism of mind/soul over body/nature in many religious traditions. Thus, feminist analysis of sex and gender within religious traditions began as an analysis of the dualisms that connected men to god (or the Ultimate) as well as to mind and spirit, and women to body and nature. In looking at religious traditions from a feminist perspective, one often is struck by the tendency of religions to view men as closer to whatever is considered important, and women as closer to that which is of lesser value. In Hinduism, for example, men are sometimes considered better equipped for the religious quest, while women are best suited for worldly tasks such as producing children and maintaining the household. In religions such as Christianity and Judaism, men are sometimes conceptualized as closer to God by reason of their masculinity, while women are somewhat removed from God by reason of their femininity. Indeed, many religious traditions view women, and issues associated with women, as problematic. Women are rendered variously as temptresses, deceivers, weak, ignorant, or simply distractions. As such, they are to be controlled, secluded, and sometimes shunned.

We do not think that there is any single convincing explanation for patriarchal privilege. There is no one simple answer to the question of why this privilege arose. In this book we will not attend to the question of why. There are a number of scholarly works that deal with this question, and the jury is still out. Rather, we will attend more to the 'how' of patriarchy—how it has functioned in various religious traditions.

We have asked each author to take a feminist approach to her material, by which we mean that each approaches the material with questions of whether and how a particular tradition (or traditions) has sorted people into gender and sex categories and what that has meant for women in terms of status, roles, power, and so on. Within each tradition there are women who are themselves suspicious of how women have been treated. There are also women who do not see that suspicion as important and who are content to remain within their own tradition without questioning the status and roles of women. The authors

have tried to portray this spectrum, taking seriously the integrity of the tradition under discussion and exploring its inner diversities. In *Women and Religious Traditions* we use the term *feminist* broadly to include women in a wide variety of positions that recognize and seek to change the fact that women have been systemically seen and portrayed as inferior to men. We examine some of the ways in which these portrayals of women have had social, political, economic, and religious consequences.

It is important to recognize in this context that feminist methodologies are multiple. Though feminists have in common their concern for the position and status of women, they do not necessarily agree on the manner in which these concerns should be understood or addressed. Feminist methodologies tend to focus on issues of power and the way in which power manifests itself in a given social context, privileging some members and disenfranchising others. They are also attentive to differences and the manner in which differences (be they gender, race, economic, or other forms of difference) are constructed. Feminist methodologies encourage us to question these matters. Students interested in feminist methodology might consult the *Dictionary of Feminist Theories* by Letty Russell and J. Shannon Clarkson, eds (1996). There are also several journals that publish current materials in feminist studies, including the *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*.

In *Women and Religious Traditions* we are not exhaustive by any means in our choice of traditions, but we chose those that most often appear in religion courses in North American universities and colleges. The decision to place them in a roughly historical order reflects the manner in which courses on Women and Religion are often taught. Each chapter of the book is organized to deal with several specific topics:

1. History and status of women: Contributors were asked to make some general observations about the history of the tradition and the status and roles of women within it.
2. Texts, rituals, and interpretations: Each chapter contains some information about texts and rituals as they reflect and affect the status of women, though for text-based traditions this information is greater than for traditions that are ritual-based. Our questions in this section include those of interpretation and authority: how are women depicted in the texts and the interpretive tradition; who is considered to be an authoritative interpreter; how does this influence women in the tradition; do women accept these interpretations; and do they interpret their roles differently from the way men interpret them?
3. Symbols and gender: Each chapter addresses the symbols within a



particular religious tradition, and the manner in which symbols are gendered or interpreted in relation to gender. Several of the chapters comment, in this context, on the role of goddess or goddesses within the tradition and of central female figures. They also comment on the ways in which these figures function as symbols and describe various strategies devised by women in these traditions for retrieving and reconceiving these figures so that they can empower women.

4. Sexuality: Each chapter addresses issue of how sexuality is configured and the implications of so doing. Some chapters speak to the question of rituals related to women's sexuality, as, for example, rituals celebrating the birth of females or celebrating first menstruation, first sexual experience, and menopause. Other chapters examine the manner in which heterosexual relationships and same-sex relationships between women are being configured in various religious traditions.

5. Social change: Contributors were asked to explore how the particular tradition they were writing about might promote social change in the status of women.

a) Official and unofficial roles of women: Questions here include whether women play roles that are not necessarily privileged as 'central' but which make for interesting reinterpretations. Are there lifestyle alternatives for women and, if so, what are they? In this context, several chapters explore the opposition between 'domestic' and 'public' spaces and comment on the impact this distinction has on the religious lives of women. Other chapters comment on the propensity of various traditions to elevate women who support their men and act as guardians of family piety.

b) Backlash: Each chapter comments on the degree to which there has been backlash against women or whether fundamentalisms have affected women in the tradition. As noted in the Christianity chapter, Letty Russell comments in this regard: "backlash is a powerful counterassault on the rights of women of all colors, men of color, gay, lesbian and bisexual persons, working-class persons, poor persons and other less powerful groups both in the US and abroad" (Russell 1996: 477). Backlash is a topic that has been articulated particularly in the case of the western traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, but it is also evidenced in some of the other traditions examined in this text.

c) Unique features: Our assumption throughout this volume is that each religious tradition is unique and must be understood as such, and so we asked contributors to describe how these particular features affect women.

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