

# *State of the Art*

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## **Feminist Approaches to the Study of Religion**

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Feminist studies, post-colonialism, and post-structuralism have been transforming the humanities. The tension in each between theory and praxis has in many cases been creative. Some of the new writing has tended towards the jargon-ridden and obscurantist, obfuscating rather than illuminating. The best has allowed us to think in terms of pluralities and diversities, rather than of the unities and universals, so beloved by an earlier generation of scholars of religion. Post-structuralists have dispensed with tired monocausal explanations of persisting inequalities based on sexual, racial, and class difference. They similarly question the notion that power is unified, coherent, and centralised. Instead of a search for single origins, they try to conceive of processes so interconnected that they cannot be disentangled.

These revivifying forces in the humanities seem to have had little impact on studies in religion, notwithstanding the intense reclamation of women in the Christian tradition in the last twenty years, which some call 'herstory'. Studies in religion will remain insulated from many of these transforming forces, until

scholars of religion stop politely tolerating feminist studies in religion as 'women's concerns' or 'feminist issues', with no relevance either to the male academic majority or to those women who reject the label 'feminist'. From my reading of debates in the I.A.H.R. and A.A.S.R. in the 1980s, this perception of irrelevance to the mainstream seems to be due to the slowness to understand feminism as movement and 'gender' as a term. I can best illustrate this by providing a brief historiographic review, which arises out of my work as an historian of religion in New Zealand and Australia. In this review and subsequent discussion of terms I will raise conceptual and methodological problems. Similar conceptual and methodological difficulties arise for those studying other religious traditions and those from other disciplines, who become aware of the gendering of their own field.

One of the earliest of the feminist approaches to the study of religion, in particular of Christianity, was to name the problem of women's alienation from the Church and to seek root causes. Feminists, in examining their own society, named the problem as 'patriarchy' or

'male domination', while Christian feminists lambasted 'the patriarchal Church'. Building on Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1952), Mary Daly in *The Church and the Second Sex* (1968) examined the interrelationship between religious ideology and women's role in society<sup>1</sup>. Both drew implausible causal connections between the portrayal of women by the Church Fathers and women's contemporary experience of exclusion from responsible decision-making.

The second-wave women's movement has significantly helped to re-shape Christianity in Australia, and, more so, in New Zealand. In the academy, it has generated new sub-disciplines, including feminist theology, feminist hermeneutics, and feminist religious history. From the 1970s much of the feminist historiography has been clearly revisionist in its attempt to rectify the invisibility of most women of the past. In a 'substitution' exercise, feminist revisionists celebrated women's contribution and passed over men's contribution. Notions of 'sisterhood', 'solidarity', and 'foremothers' were employed to help overcome the isolation women experienced in their contemporary struggles. In 1974 Rosemary Ruether challenged the preoccupation of most patristic scholarship with the Church Fathers, by affirming women's leadership roles in the early Church with the term 'Mothers of the Church', while Leonard Swidler spoke in 1979 of 'Desert Mothers'<sup>2</sup>. As creators of a new revisionist branch of patristic scholarship, Rosemary Ruether, Elizabeth Clark, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Elaine Pagels, and others too numerous to mention, raised many questions which still need to be pursued diligently. Their works helped to establish a new canon of feminist orthodoxy in those universities and theological col-

leges offering courses in 'Women and Religion'<sup>3</sup>. In pressing their case, however, these pioneers created inevitable distortions, indulged in selective reading, and used overarching typologies which obscured the facts of women's experience. Their claims regarding the first three centuries were re-evaluated in 1986 by the German scholar, Susanne Heine, in what may be seen as the beginning of a post-revisionist phase in feminist historiography<sup>4</sup>.

Despite the importance of this post-revisionist phase, the revisionist approach to the study of religion has tended to predominate. A recent, and less polemical example of 'herstory' or 'contribution history' may be seen in the works of Barbara MacHaffie<sup>5</sup>. A new volume of essays, *Women in the Church*, attests to the tendency of feminist religious historians to focus on particular issues within a narrow scope, rectifying the exclusion of women from general accounts by delineating women's contribution in particular dimensions of the life of the Church<sup>6</sup>. One of the main problems of 'herstory' is that it assumes that gender explains the different histories of women and men, but does not theorise about how gender operates historically. 'Herstory' tends therefore to isolate women as a special and separate topic of study, and can too readily be consigned to the 'separate sphere' associated exclusively with the female sex. If feminist approaches to the study of religion are not to ossify, we must critically examine our understanding of feminism as movement and 'gender' as a term.

Many people associate the term 'feminism' with collective and consensus-based decision-making, non-hierarchical organisation, the rejection of femininity of appearance, and the belief that the enslavement of women is the root of all op-

pression. The philosopher of science, Janet Radcliffe Richards, argues that to the extent that feminists have accepted these perceptions, feminism as a movement has tended to become fossilised<sup>7</sup>. The conflation of the idea of feminism as a particular ideology with that of feminism as a concern with women's problems means that those rejecting particular aspects of the ideology may also ignore or trivialise all suggestions that women are seriously badly treated. A broader definition of feminism is needed for it to survive the failure of any particular set of theories about the position of women. Richards suggests that the future of the movement is more secure if defined as 'a movement for the elimination of sex-based injustice'<sup>8</sup>. Thus defined, feminism cannot automatically take the side of any woman against any man, nor be seen as a movement to support women who suffer from injustice. 'Feminism is not concerned with a group of people it wants to benefit, but with a type of injustice it wants to eliminate.'<sup>9</sup> As a movement opposed to the systematic social injustices suffered by women because of their sex, feminism cannot support the interests of all women under all circumstances. The advantage of this broad definition is that men are not excluded<sup>10</sup>. For a younger generation of feminist scholars, that is important. Feminism, then, is not a monolithic movement. Furthermore, I would argue that our contemporary debates need to be informed by an understanding of the historical diversity within feminism as it has evolved in the last two centuries.

In a very helpful overview, *Faces of Feminism; a Study of Feminism as a Social Movement*, the British sociologist Olive Banks has identified three distinct intellectual traditions within feminism, each originating in the eighteenth century,

but continuing to operate as 'differentiating principles' even within contemporary feminism. Banks identifies the first intellectual tradition as that of evangelical Christianity. The religious revivals which swept evangelical Christianity in Britain and the U.S.A. from the late eighteenth century stimulated women to become active campaigners for moral and social reform. Many evangelical women, inspired by beliefs about women's moral superiority, moved away from domestic roles to take on highly political and public roles, particularly in the campaign against slavery. The ideal of female superiority proved to be extraordinarily pervasive, and this legacy of the evangelical contribution to feminism may be traced today to certain wings of radical feminism, which glorify woman in her maternal role and emphasise her unique contribution to the well-being of society<sup>11</sup>. Equal rights feminism, in contrast, has its roots in the second intellectual tradition of feminism, that of the Enlightenment philosophers. Mary Wollstonecroft and John Stuart Mill persuasively argued that differences between women and men were shaped by the environment rather than by nature, being socially constructed rather than biologically determined. Given these convictions they called for an end to male privilege and the implementation of reform based on the recognition of women's natural rights. The third intellectual tradition on which feminism drew, communitarian socialism, strongly attacked the traditional family and, to a lesser extent, monogamous sexual relationships. The Saint-Simonian movement in France advocated a system of communal living in which responsibility for child-rearing shifted from the individual to the community. The contemporary movement within radical feminism for

quality state-subsidised childcare and the call for more flexible sexual relationships between women and men has its roots in this earlier movement. Fairly or unfairly, nearly two centuries of feminist thought and practice have generated contradictory ideals of woman as moral redemptrix, 'unsexed' campaigner for equal rights, and sexual anarchist<sup>12</sup>.

These understandings of feminism as a movement, which emphasise diversity rather than unity, are also strongly supported by the work of post-structuralist historians. This brings me to 'gender' as a term.

'Gender' is sometimes used descriptively as a synonym or substitute for 'women', particularly by those wishing to make women's history more acceptable in the academy. Much of the use of 'gender' in feminist studies in religion falls into this category. It is 'herstory' by another name.

A second descriptive usage of 'gender' refers to relations between the sexes. In common with the equal rights tradition within feminism, this use of gender implies that differences between women and men are socially constructed rather than biologically determined. This usage has the advantage of the wider definition of feminism elucidated by Richards, that men are not excluded, since the social construction of women's role cannot be seen independently from that of the male role. As a result of the women's movement, men have been encouraged to examine questions concerning male identity, in particular the social construction of masculinity. The account by historian, Jock Phillips, of male culture and masculinity in New Zealand raises important questions regarding gender identity for both women and men<sup>13</sup>. Unfortunately few male scholars of religion see the need to

problematise masculinity. In Australia one of the first examples of the use of feminist criticism to study male identity in the churches has been written by a woman historian, Anne O'Brien<sup>14</sup>. My survey of the bibliographic tool, *Religion Index One*, showed little change in the following categories from 1987, when I started my doctoral research on gender, to 1991, the latest complete record: 'men', 1 in 1987, 2 in 1991; 'masculinity', 4 in 1987, 3 in 1991; 'man and ...', 1 in 1987, none in 1991. In comparison the category 'women' attracted 312 and 315 entries, 'sex and theology' 4 and 22 entries, and 'gender' and 'English language - gender' rising from 13 to 17 entries<sup>15</sup>. The articles on men arose from the writers' reflection on the men's movement and on the issue of sex and violence in the family and the churches.

After reading Phillips, it struck me that the belief held by temperance campaigners and advocates of women's suffrage that women were more moral and spiritual than men, and the image of the rugged individualistic Kiwi male, were mutually reinforcing. Little is known, however, about the interrelationship of the female and male cultures. Unfortunately Phillips did not take into account the role of religion in the process by which gender roles developed. Still to be established is the extent to which separate and dichotomous male and female cultures existed in New Zealand, or whether it is more appropriate to speak in broader terms of 'gendered cultures'<sup>16</sup>. The tendency for men and women to live highly differentiated lives may in part account for the tensions and ambivalences which have characterised the family in New Zealand society and may also be a key to understanding why the churches invested such energy in persuading women to have

a highly idealised perception of their role as wives and mothers. In this way, then, the second descriptive use of 'gender', which refers to relations between the sexes, could open up fruitful avenues of investigation for historians and sociologists of religion.

Some scholars of religion have constructed gender exclusively through kinship, by including discussion of sex, marriage, and the family in their general accounts. An example of this approach is Hugh Jackson's chapter on 'The Family' in his thematic history, *Churches & people in Australia and New Zealand, 1860-1930*<sup>17</sup>. While Jackson did not set out to write feminist history, the lack of consideration of the gendering of colonial society in broader terms cannot be overlooked in an account that claims to be a general history, albeit cast in the new mould of social history. Such accounts do not recognise that gender is not only constructed through kinship, but also in the economy and the polity, which are increasingly sustained independently of kinship.

These usages of gender are, however, still descriptive. Like theories of patriarchy, they do not show what gender inequality has to do with other inequalities. Like the feminist revising of psychoanalysis, whether by Nancy Chodorow and Carol Gilligan who use theories of object-relations, or by those in the French school who re-read Freud in terms of Lacanian theory, these usages tend to limit the concept of gender to family and household experience. Neither the concept nor the individual can be seen in relation to other social systems of economy, politics, or power.

Post-structuralist feminists like Joan Wallach Scott argue that these descriptive approaches leave 'those (male) subjects already established as dominant and uni-

versal.' They amount to 'an almost naive endorsement of positivism'<sup>18</sup>. If the work of feminist scholars is to challenge accepted categories of analysis, gender needs to be used as an 'analytic category', much in the way that class has been used by social historians. Scott called for a more radical epistemology. The post-structuralism of Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida seemed to open up new intellectual directions, since it relativised the status of all knowledge, linked knowledge and power, and theorised them in terms of the operations of difference.

For Scott gender means 'knowledge about sexual differences'. Such knowledge is never absolute. It refers to the ideas and institutions, everyday practices and specialised rituals, all of which constitute social relationships<sup>19</sup>. The relations between the sexes are regarded as 'a primary aspect of social organisation (rather than following from, say, economic or demographic pressures)'; much in the way that some sociologists of religion have argued that religion is not simply a 'dependent variable' in analysis<sup>20</sup>. Post-structuralist feminists treat the opposition between male and female as 'problematic rather than known, as something contextually defined, repeatedly constructed'. 'Man' and 'woman' are empty categories 'because they have no ultimate, transcendent meaning'. But they are also 'overflowing categories', because 'even when they appear to be fixed, they contain within them alternative, denied, or suppressed definitions'<sup>21</sup>. Scholars who acknowledge that meanings are constructed through exclusions are more likely to develop a reflexive, self-critical approach. Scott concludes that such an approach 'undermines claims for authority based on totalising explanations, essentialised categories of analysis (be they human na-

ture, race, class, sex or, "the oppressed"), or synthetic narratives that assume an inherent unity for the past<sup>22</sup>.

Consciously or unconsciously, this approach to gender is reflected in two most illuminating re-interpretations of old theological debates. In particular, Janet Forsythe Fishburn's *The Fatherhood of God and the Victorian Family; the Social Gospel in America* and Betty DeBerg's *Ungodly Women; Gender and the First Wave of American Fundamentalism*<sup>23</sup> have shown that while exponents of the Social Gospel in the late nineteenth century and fundamentalists in the early twentieth century may have been divided theologically, they responded to gender disruptions in a remarkably similar manner. For those interested in the new exegesis, Fishburn's is a convincing examination of the way in which liberal ministers associated with the Social Gospel movement countered the nineteenth century feminisation of religion by claiming that their proper place was in the exclusively male world of urban politics, social reform, and public service, while women's role was in the home. DeBerg shows that fundamentalists tried to remasculinise the Church with aggressive language and militant posturing. In showing that the contested categories 'man' and 'woman' were at the centre, and not at the periphery, of the emerging fundamentalism, DeBerg addressed what Leonard Sweet has described as 'the most gaping hole in the historiography on fundamentalism'<sup>24</sup>.

More recently, and closer to home, Mark Strom, a conservative evangelical Pastor and Management Consultant in western Sydney, gave a most stimulating paper on 'Evangelical Theology and Church Praxis' at the Centre for the Study of Australian Christianity<sup>25</sup>. He used

feminist theorising of sexual abuse as a means of re-conceptualising power relations within evangelicalism. Starting with the anguish of members of his own congregation, as they dealt with long suppressed memories of childhood incest and found they could no longer call God 'Father', Mark Strom then proceeded to problematise many dimensions of evangelicalism, while still wishing to uphold major doctrinal tenets. While many scholars of religion who might wish to think of themselves as 'liberal' in their sympathies deem feminist studies in religion to be irrelevant, those forced to re-examine their praxis through feminist theory include Christians, whom liberals frequently deride. Another example of old categories being overturned!

In proposing the formation of a Women's Caucus of the A.A.S.R. in 1986, Penny McKibbin (now Magee) delineated its last aim as: 'The prevention of censorship of discussion of gender-specific issues within both the A.A.S.R. and any other professional associations with which the A.A.S.R. is connected'<sup>26</sup>. This reflects the difficulties experienced at the I.A.H.R. conference in Sydney in 1985. If studies in religion are to benefit from the best of the transformation of the humanities encouraged by feminist studies, post-colonialism, and post-structuralism, a very different understanding of gender is needed, together with a new and radical epistemology.

## Notes

1. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, translated and edited by H.M. Parshley, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, [1952], originally published as *Le Deuxième Sexe: I. and Les Faits et les Mythes: II. L'Experience Vecue*, Paris, Gallimard, 1949; Mary Daly, *The Church and the*

*Second Sex, with the Feminist Postchristian Introduction and New Archaic Afterwords by the Author*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1985 [first published 1968]

2. Rosemary Ruether, 'Mothers of the Church: ascetic women in the late patristic age', in *Women of Spirit: Female Leadership in the Jewish and Christian Traditions*, Rosemary Ruether and Eleanor McLaughlin (eds), New York, Simon and Schuster, 1974, pp.71-98; and Leonard Swidler, *Biblical Affirmations of Woman*, Philadelphia, The Westminster Press, 1979, p.340

3. See *Religion and Sexism; Images of Woman in the Jewish and Christian Traditions*, Rosemary Ruether (ed.), New York, Simon and Schuster, 1974; Elizabeth A. Clark, *Jerome, Chrysostom and Friends; Essays and Translations* (Studies in Women and Religion), New York, The Edwin Mellen Press, 1979; Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her; a Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*, London, SCM Press Ltd, 1983; Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*, New York, Random House, 1979. See also Karen Armstrong, *The Gospel According to Woman; Christianity's Creation of the Sex War in the West*, London, Elm Tree Books, 1986; and *Women and Religion; a Feminist Sourcebook of Christian Thought*, Elizabeth Clark and Herbert Richardson (eds), New York/London, Harper & Row Publishers, 1977

4. Susanne Heine, *Frauen der frühen Christenheit*, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1986; translated by John Bowden and published as Susanne Heine, *Women and Early Christianity; are the Feminist Scholars Right?* London, SCM Press Ltd, 1987. For an example of a post-revisionist approach to the fourth century, see Jane M.R. Simpson, 1988, 'Women and asceticism in the fourth century: a question of interpretation', *The Journal of Religious History*, 15, 1: 38-60

5. Barbara J. MacHaffie, *Herstory; Women in Christian Tradition*, Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1986; and her *Readings in Herstory; Women in Christian Tradition*, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1992

6. See *Women in the Church; Papers Read at the 1989 Summer Meeting and the 1990 Winter Meeting of the Ecclesiastical History Society*, W.J. Sheils and Diana Wood (eds), Oxford, Basil Blackwell for the Ecclesiastical History Society, 1990

7. Janet Radcliffe Richards, *The Sceptical Feminist; a Philosophical Enquiry*, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1982, p.14

8. Richards, p.16

9. Richards, pp.17-18

10. Richards, p.18

11. For Banks' discussion of the evangelical movement as a significant factor in the development of feminist consciousness from the 1830s, especially in the U.S.A., see Olive Banks, *Faces of Feminism; a Study of Feminism as a Social Movement*, Oxford, Martin Robertson, 1981, pp.13-27. On the religious contribution to the ideal of female superiority, see Banks, pp.85-92

12. For Banks' discussion of the re-birth of the equal rights tradition and the development of radical feminism, drawing on the earlier socialist tradition, see Banks, 1981, pp.205-41

13. Jock Phillips, *A Man's Country? The Image of the Pakeha Male - a History*, Auckland, Penguin Books, 1987. For a collection of personal reflections, see *One of the Boys? Changing Views of Masculinity in New Zealand*, Michael King (ed.), Auckland, Heinemann, 1988

14. Anne O'Brien, 'A Church full of men; masculinism and the Church in Australian history', *Australian Historical Studies* (forthcoming), April 1993

15. *Religion Index One: Periodicals*, vol.19, G. Fay Dickenson (ed.), Chicago, American Theological Library Association, 1987, pp.113, 133, 209, 213, 299, 350-54, cf. *Religion Index One: Periodicals*, vol.23, Don Haymes (ed.), Evanston, American Theological Library Association, 1992, pp.136, 164, 263, 258, 343-38, 368

16. See Caroline Daley, 'Gender in the community: a study of the women and men of the Taradale Area 1886-1930', PhD thesis, Victoria University of Wellington, 1992

17. H.R. Jackson, *Churches & People in Australia and New Zealand, 1860-1930*, North Sydney/Wellington, Allen & Unwin/Port Nicholson Press, 1987, pp.142-66

18. Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1988, p.3

19. Scott, p.2

20. Scott, p.25

21. Scott, p.49

22. Scott, pp.8-9

23. Betty A. DeBerg, *Ungodly Women; Gender and the First Wave of American Fundamentalism*, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1990; Janet Forsythe Fishburn, *The Fatherhood of*

*God and the Victorian Family; the Social Gospel in America*, Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1981

24. Sweet, cited in DeBerg, back cover

25. Presented on 9 November 1992 at Robert Menzies College, Macquarie University. To be published by The Centre for the Study of Australian Christianity, in the Occasional Paper Series.

26. My emphasis. Pro forma letter from Penny McKibbin, Co-ordinator, A.A.S.R. Women and Religion Caucus, 14.iv.1986. I am indebted to Penny Magee for sending me copies of A.A.S.R. Women's Caucus correspondence and newsletters.

