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 femi-
nists lambasted ‘the patriarchal Church’. 
Building on Simone de Beauvoir’s The 
Second Sex (1952), Mary Daly in The 
Church and the Second Sex (1968) exam-
ined the interrelationship between relig-
ious ideology and women’s role in 
society1. Both drew implausible causal 
connections between the portrayal of 
women by the Church Fathers and 
women’s contemporary experience of ex-
clusion from responsible decision-making. 

The second-wave women’s movement 
has significantly helped to re-shape Chris-
tianity 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, femi-
nist revisionists celebrated women’s con-
tribution and passed over men’s 
contribution. Notions of ‘sisterhood’, 
‘solidarity’, and ‘foremothers’ were em-
ployed to help overcome the isolation 
women experienced in their contempo-
rary struggles. In 1974 Rosemary Ruether 
challenged the preoccupation of most pa-
tristic scholarship with the Church Fa-
thers, 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 Moth-
ers’2. 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 pur-
sued diligently. Their works helped to es-
establish a new canon of feminist orthodoxy 
in those universities and theological col-
leges offering courses in ‘Women and Re-
ligion’3. In pressing their case, however, 
these pioneers created inevitable distor-
tions, indulged in selective reading, and 
used overarching typologies which ob-
scured the facts of women’s experience. 
Their claims regarding the first three cen-
turies were re-evaluated in 1986 by the 
German scholar, Susanne Heine, in what 
may be seen as the beginning of a post-re-
visionist phase in feminist historiogra-
phy4.

Despite the importance of this post-re-
visionist phase, the revisionist approach 
to the study of religion has tended to pre-
dominate. A recent, and less polemical ex-
ample of ‘herstory’ or ‘contribution 
history’ may be seen in the works of Bar-
bara MacHaffie5. A new volume of es-
says, Women in the Church, attests to the 
tendency of feminist religious historians 
to focus on particular issues within a nar-
row scope, rectifying the exclusion of 
women from general accounts by delineat-
ing women’s contribution in particular di-
mensions of the life of the Church6. One 
of the main problems of ‘herstory’ is that 
it assumes that gender explains the differ-
ent 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 con-
signed to the ‘separate sphere’ associated 
exclusively with the female sex. If femi-
nist approaches to the study of religion 
are not to ossify, we must critically exam-
ine our understanding of feminism as 
movement and ‘gender’ as a term. 

Many people associate the term ‘femi-
nism’ with collective and consensus-
based decision-making, non-hierarchical 
organisation, the rejection of femininity 
of appearance, and the belief that the en-
slavement 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.

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’.

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.’ 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. 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.

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, 'un-sexed' campaigner for equal rights, and sexual anarchist.

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. 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. 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. 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'. 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*11. 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 universal.' They amount to 'an almost naive endorsement of positivism'18. 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 relationships19. 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 analysis20. 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'21. 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.

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* 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'.

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. 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'. 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

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


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


19. Scott, p.2
20. Scott, p.25
21. Scott, p.49
22. Scott, pp.8-9


24. Sweet, cited in DeBerg, back cover
