INTRODUCTION

The continuing relevance of religion for understanding gender roles, identities and relationships in society

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Introduction: setting the scene

The following 40 chapters in this volume are testimony to the enduring role of religion in shaping attitudes and behaviours with respect to gender roles, identities and relationships in ways that have an impact upon people’s ability to participate in the activities of their religious traditions fully and equally, as well as their opportunities and status within their local communities and wider societies. The chapters are also testimony to the enduring role of religion in people’s private lives, both freely chosen as well as imposed, in ways that help and hinder the navigation of the challenges they face, as they variously comply with and resist the gendered impact that religion has upon their self-identity and experience of the world. While religious traditions and the contexts within which they are lived and experienced are diverse and multifaceted, the chapters in this volume demonstrate common themes across traditions and regions in terms of how they impact upon women and men. Religious traditions typically include adherence to opinions and diktats about how men and women are expected to behave in their families and society at large, about their sexual behaviour and orientation, as well as their family arrangements, and is the case in the Global North as well as the Global South. Although this affects both men and women, religions have a strong tendency to normalise and naturalise women’s inferior status compared to men, as well as their dependency upon them, and to link this to biological or sexual differences. While the profound impact that this has had and continues to have upon the lives of women across the globe is well known, following more than 50 years of women/gender and religion scholarship that have unpacked these dynamics, the importance of considering religion and gender together is often not reflected in social and political analysis that seeks to improve women’s lives. Furthermore, it is often considered in ways that reinscribe sexist and colonialist views of women in the Global South as lacking agency and as victims of religious traditions from which they need to be rescued. Even where religion is not such an explicit social force, as Edwards shows with respect to her work on the image of the biblical Eve in advertising, such biblical imagery reinforces deep-seated cultural attitudes towards the dangerous allure of women’s sexuality and their role as sexual temptresses, where ‘instead of offering women new or alternative ways of viewing themselves, advertising rehashes old images and old stereotypes’ (2008: 81).
However, religions and their gendered impact is not only with respect to their apparent androcentrism but, as McIntosh writes in Chapter 2, they also tend to ‘demarcate religious practice and observance along binary and heteronormative lines’ (p. 20), therefore also excluding and marginalising LGBTQI+ people. And indeed, progress along one axis of inclusivity does not secure it in another. As Megan Robertson shows in Chapter 13, the Methodist Church of South Africa proudly elected its first woman bishop in 2019, celebrating ‘it as a sign of . . . progressive inclusivity’ (p. 193), yet has not extended this to queer people, both clergy and lay. Finally, it is also important to look at the ways in which religion shapes gender identities, roles and relationship for men, not only those who are LGBTQI+, but also those who are heterosexual. As Neal demonstrates in his powerful chapter, a combination of feminist responses to religion since the 1960s, coupled with the colonial/racist attitudes within Christianity, has played a large role in the demonisation of heterosexual black men in the USA, impacting upon their portrayal in the media and the arts and their treatment by law enforcement and the state, as well as the kinds of masculinity they perform (Chapter 29).

In order to accommodate this diversity of impacts that religion has upon peoples’ adoption of masculine and feminine behaviour and expression of their sexuality, this volume engages a conceptual lens that is shaped by considerations of gender analysis and intersectionality. A focus on gender draws attention to the role that religion plays in contributing to the social construction of ideas about how men and women should behave in terms of their social roles and sexuality, as well as the role that it can play in challenging such powerful social structures in settings where religion is strong. A focus on intersectionality ensures that factors such as race/ethnicity, class, sexuality, gender, age and religion are considered in combination, while, as McIntosh writes,

exposing gendered oppression or exclusion that is legitimised by religion as well as that which is occasioned by outward expressions of religious identity, while guarding against the temptation towards othering, especially universalising the other and representing the other as homogenous victim rather than particular agent.

(Chapter 2, p. 21)

Despite predictions from within sociological studies from the 19th century about the decline and eventual disappearance of public, and eventually also private, religion as an inevitable mark of modernity, religious institutions and actors continue to exert influence and pass judgement upon the most personal and intimate ‘gendered’ aspects of people’s lives. As Vincett et al. write, the fact that secularisation theory3 has largely been propounded by white, male Judeo-Christian (in culture and faith) academics’, typically writing about the European experience, has meant that it has ‘tended to be blind to the experiences of other groups’ (2008: 3), including women, LGBTQI+ people and those not located in Europe. During the first wave of feminism, in the late 19th to early 20th century, while the founding fathers of sociology were predicting the decline of religion, women were continuing to battle against the impact of a sexist church that shaped their private and public lives in ways that went unnoticed and/or were deemed unimportant by male social theorists. For instance, as the feminist sociologist Skeggs writes, ‘when women appear in one of the founding fathers, Durkheim’s texts, they do so as a disruption to the central categories of his analysis, and thus are made to disappear in order for him to re-establish and maintain the internal consistency of his theory’ (2008: 2; Lehmann 1994). Moreover, as Vincett et al. write, ‘existing measures continue to find that women’s religious involvement exceeds men’s across different nations, religions and types of society’ suggesting a certain type of male bias to secularization theory (2008: 5).
Secularisation theory has also been criticised for its Eurocentrism, ignoring high levels of religiosity in the USA, a case of ‘religious exceptionalism’ where church attendance remained high despite ostensibly secularising forces (Tiryakian 1993). So, too, with evidence from much of the Global South where religion has shown little sign of diminishing in both its private and its public manifestations, despite the efforts of many postcolonial states to implement ‘secularism’ as the preferred approach to governance. Even in Western Europe, which saw a steady decline in church attendance during the 20th century and the lessening of the hold of religion on public institutions, by the 1990s sociologists had noticed a ‘resurgence of religion’ in the European public sphere as well as a higher level of religious observance of women compared to men (Casanova 1994; Trzebiatowska and Bruce 2012). While in Chapter 26 Nella van den Brandt questions the ‘false impression’ that religion ever entirely disappeared from Western Europe, she also draws attention to dynamics in Europe which require renewed attention to the nexus between religion, gender and society. This includes the arrival since the post–World War II period of ‘guest workers and postcolonial migrants from North Africa, the Middle East, Central Asia, and Indonesia, often, but not always, with Islamic backgrounds’ as well as the strengthening ‘conservative Christian backlash to women’s equality and sexual diversity’, sometimes aligning with nationalist and populist movements, particularly in Central, Southern, and Eastern Europe (p. 393). Even with these ‘new’ dynamics in Europe, which push against liberalising trends, it is also the case that more liberal Christian churches, including sections of the Anglican Church, remain compromised over the tensions created by women’s ordination and same-sex marriage (see, for example, Davie and Starkey 2019; Davie 2015; Clucas 2012; Shaw 2015).

The efforts to name and describe this apparent ‘(re)appearance’ of religion in public life, in terms of the ‘deprivatisation of religion’ (Casanova 1994), ‘desecularisation’ (Berger 1999) or the emergence of the ‘post-secular’ (Habermas 2008), are again manifest within sociological fields dominated by white males and we argue are largely unsatisfactory since they remain attempts to revise partial social theories about religion and social change that were already narrow and exclusivist. One impact of the dominance of secularisation theory has been the marginalisation of consideration of religion from social and political analysis in fields such as international development, foreign policy and peacebuilding (i.e. if religion is in decline or has in some instances disappeared then it is not a significant variable and can be ignored). The gender-biased and Eurocentric/colonialist imprint of secularisation theories on how religion has been researched in academia and approached by social reformers and policymakers is a theme taken up in a number of the chapters (e.g. Omer, Chapter 22; Bartelink, Chapter 24; Nogueira-Godsey, Chapter 25). For instance, as Stiebert writes in Chapter 23, ‘religion must certainly be a significant part of any attempts to understand and account for sexual violence’ and is ‘ignored at our peril’ (p. 345). The dominance of theories of secularisation has had the effect of downplaying the role that religion has upon the gendered social and self-identities of women, non-heteronormative and gender-variant people (groups about whose behaviour and identity religious traditions have a great deal to say). Had such theorising also included the voices of women, LGBTQI+ people and those from the Global South, would secularisation theory have gained the currency it did in the form that it did? With this question in mind, one could be forgiven for viewing secularisation theory as normative and political rather than descriptive and interpretive, reflective of a European post-Enlightenment patriarchal worldview to serve ‘European modernity and its secular project’ (Carrasco Miró 2020: 95; Asad 2003). Rather than viewing this as a ‘resurgence of religion’ per se (cunningly confounding and outwitting earlier trajectories of secularisation), we suggest instead that global theories of secularisation have been progressively weakened as the avenues of sociological scholarship have widened to include a more diverse range of contributions. This includes contributions from and about women, who have higher levels of individual religiosity on the whole compared to men

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and upon whose lives public religion has a more invasive impact, and those seeking to challenge the ‘coloniality of secularism’ (Carrasco Miró 2020: 93; Asad 2003). The challenge to secularisation theory is as much the result of a paradigm shift, brought about by the impact of increasing numbers of women and people of colour carrying out scholarship on their experiences of religion from a gendered and decolonial perspective, as it is a result of male social theorists realising that their theories needed revising and ‘no longer’ fitted the evidence.

Just as scholarship about secularisation reflected the perspective of a narrow range of largely male actors, scholarship on religion did the same. As McIntosh writes in this volume in Chapter 2, ‘the post-Enlightenment/academic study of religion was more concerned with its rationalizing approach than with that which it was omitting [. . . where. . .] the field of religious data explored assumed that the male experience accounted for the experience of all practitioners’ (p. 19). In fact, the androcentric, heteronormative and colonialist bias in the development of theories of secularisation as well as scholarship on religion at least up to the 1970s are two sides of the same coin, with those who sit outside this privileged vantage point ignored as either producers or subjects of knowledge. Where there was scholarship on non-Christian religions, this tended to be carried out via an orientalist/colonial approach by white men that took ‘Christianity to be the norm’ and which sought ‘to civilize that which it defined as “other” and primitive’ (p. 19). By the 1970s, marking what is often noted as the ‘second wave of feminism’, ‘as universities started to offer courses in women’s studies and the influence of feminism spread to scholars of religion’ (p. 19), feminist responses to patriarchal religion took off first in North America and then spread to Europe. While this feminist response was on the whole secular and viewed religion as problematic for women’s rights and empowerment, ‘feminist theologies’ began to emerge by the late 1960s in the work of figures such as Mary Daly (1968) and Rosemary Radford Ruether (1983), who called for a revisioning of the way that religion is gendered and disadvantages women. Edited and single-authored volumes on topics concerned with ‘women and religion’ were published. Many of these sought to establish the feminist credentials of the founders of religions, which were argued to have later became corrupted by surrounding patriarchal cultures, the ways that women are oppressed by their religious traditions and the ways that they are resisting them, developing what have been called ‘religious feminisms’, which reinterpret religious traditions from within in the light of contemporary feminist thinking (e.g. see Longman, Chapter 3; Llewellyn, Chapter 12; Bartelink, Chapter 24 e.g. Barlas 2002; Holm and Bowker 2001; Franzman 1999; Klein, 1995; Gross 1993; Sharma 1994).

Although by the 1980s scholarship on feminist theology and alternative feminist spiritualities was thriving, it was criticised for failing to integrate the perspectives of women from the Global South whose commitment to their religious traditions had persisted, but also in many cases had experiences that were also overlaid by a history of European colonialism. There was a tendency within women and religion scholarship for women in the Global North to view those in the South as victims of their religious traditions, who needed ‘saving’ by feminist religious discourse (Pui Lan 2002). With the development of postcolonial theory, which is often taken to be marked by the publication of Edward Said’s 1978 Orientalism while there were also many women writing in this field, women in the South too began reflecting and writing on their gendered experiences of religion from a postcolonial perspective inspired by the scholarship of women such as Gayatri Spivak (1988) and Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1984). As the literature on ‘religious feminisms’ became more numerous and diverse, coinciding with the ‘third wave of feminism’ (1980s–), we find studies not only seeking to challenge the ‘coloniality of secularism’ but also of dominant approaches to women and religion that impose Western norms (Donaldson and Pui-Lan 2002). In probably the most cited text across all of the chapters in this volume is the Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject by the late Saba Mahmood (2005), where she ‘explores conceptions of self, subjectivity and agency among urban Egyptian women’s practices
of Islamic piety that defy the secular-liberal paradigm that undergirds much of western, including feminist, thought’ (Longman Chapter 3). What the repeated citation of this text indicates is an increased willingness to consider that concepts such as agency or empowerment in relation to gender and religion should not be defined narrowly or without consideration of localised voices, even if these voices challenge dominant preconceptions of behaviour and attitude (Avishai 2008). Of course, although it might be gratifying that more complex manifestations of ideas such as ‘agency’ are increasingly commonplace in the contemporary study of religion and gender, it does not follow that awareness of these alternative perspectives removes the tensions for (feminist) researchers writing about those who might hold very different viewpoints about social roles, hierarchies and relationships, which the chapters in this volume variously attest to.

**Approach and structure of the volume**

The previous discussion has set the scene for the approach that this volume takes. First, it adopts a conceptual lens that is shaped by considerations of gender analysis and intersectionality. It aims to move beyond a bias towards a focus on women in gender studies to also include material on men and masculinities as a relatively overlooked area. Second, the volume includes contributions from, and discussion of the work of scholars in, the Global North and the Global South, with respect to chapters that focus on religion, gender and society in particular locations as well as theoretical and methodological contributions that need to move beyond a Eurocentric focus. Third, the chapters in this volume seek to capture both ‘liberal’ and ‘conservative’ styles of religion and their impact on the construction of gender identities, but also they aim to move beyond this binary. While both extremes are part of the subject matter of this volume, we present original research that problematises this binary and considers, for example, why women might choose to stay in or join apparently ‘conservative’ traditions as well as the ways in which they appear to be complicit in perpetuating styles of religiosity that are in conflict with liberal values of gender equality. Fourth, and linked to this, the volume seeks to not essentialise the contribution of particular religions to the construction of gender identities, roles and relationships, but instead seeks to adopt a multidimensional and intersectional approach where the study of ‘religions’ cannot be isolated from social, political and geographical factors and contexts. Fifth, the overall focus of the volume is contemporary and sociological, rather than historical, textual or theological/philosophical. Historical discussions and material on texts, theologies and philosophies are included to contextualise contemporary social formations and to help in understanding the religion and gender nexus in contemporary societies. Finally, no handbook can be comprehensive in terms of coverage, and whereas many texts on this topic have taken an approach that focuses on the contribution of individual religions to constructing gender identities, our volume enables readers to explore this through the lenses of ‘critical debates for religions gender and society: theories, concepts and methodologies’, ‘issues and themes in religions, gender and society’ and ‘contexts and locations’. The authors selected for the volume reflect careful work on behalf of us as editors. Whilst we approached some authors because we were already aware of their contributions to the field, we were keen to include work from scholars at earlier stages in their careers, as well as research from scholars who might have received less attention in the Anglophone academy and who were writing from within the geographical areas we were hoping to feature. This resulted in numerous emails and exchanges with scholars from across the world, with each often recommending others. We also put out a call for papers on social media, and through email networks, when we identified specific gaps that we wanted to fill. The result is a volume of religious, geographical, cultural and political variety, which reflects a complex and multidimensional field.
Part 1: Critical debates for religions, gender and society: theories, concepts and methodologies

Part 1 is comprised of 11 chapters that address critical debates in the study of religion, gender and society through an examination of different theories, concepts and methodologies to lay out the key debates as they have developed and to take stock of where they are today. These debates incorporate concepts of space and place, bodies and embodiment, the digital and online, agency and identity, activism and the public sphere, oppression and liberation, postcolonialism, methodology and reflexiveness. In ‘Gender in Religion, Religion in Society: The Agency and Identity of Christian Women’, Esther McIntosh starts the volume by reminding us of the androcentric and colonialist agenda behind the academic study of religion. It was not until the 1970s that this began to shift as the emergence of women’s and feminist studies began to influence how religion was approached in the academy. As a correction to the ways in which ‘the feminist study of religion has too often resulted in damaging universalizing, homogenizing and essentializing categories’ (Chapter 2, p. 20), McIntosh urges, ‘we cannot separate religion and society as fields of study. We can only study religion in society, and in so doing we must acknowledge our own biases and starting points’ (Chapter 2, p. 21).

In the next chapter, ‘The Feminism Conundrum: A Contested Term for the Study of Religion and Gender’, Chia Longman asks, ‘What does it mean to study religion, gender and society in a distinctively feminist way?’ (Chapter 3, p. 37). The tensions between religion and feminism have permeated the study of religion, gender and society and despite the ‘post-secular turn in feminist theory’ she argues that ‘religion remains a conundrum for feminism’ (Chapter 3, p. 37). While women and LGBTQI+ people have not fared well at the hands of patriarchal religions, she notes the ‘lack of exchange across disciplinary divides contributing to persistent limitations in our theories and methodologies’ (Chapter 3, p. 37). Widening these exchanges is at the heart of this volume, which although it has a sociological focus it also includes contributions from scholars working across different disciplines, including from religious studies, women’s/gender studies, theology, biblical studies, anthropology, sociology, political science and development studies. In ‘Oppression or Liberation? Moving beyond Binaries in Religion and Gender Studies’, Line Nyhagen builds on Longman’s analysis of the feminism-religion conundrum by specifically interrogating how feminist scholars writing on religion and gender have focused on the relationship between ‘structure and agency’. She critically assesses the limitations of both structural and agentic perspectives, outlining ‘examples of more complex analyses of religion and gender that seek to overcome the oppression-liberation dichotomy’ (Chapter 4, p. 53). This necessitates, she argues, engaging ‘with critical realist perspectives, theories of intersectionality and the “lived religion” approach within the sociology of religion’, to move beyond the ‘oppression vs liberation dichotomy’ to enable ‘more complex analyses of relations between agency and structure’ (Chapter 4, p. 53).

Building on Nyhagen’s call for a ‘lived religion’ perspective that addresses the limitations of binaries in religion and gender studies, the three chapters that follow explore critical perspectives through examples grounded in lived experience and seek to shed new light on debates that often become stuck in rigid patterns. In ‘Gender, Religion, and Postcolonialism: The Birhen sa Balintawak and Masculinities in the Philippines’, Peter-Ben Smit examines the ways in which gender and postcolonialism have been related in academic studies, where ‘colonial structures frequently lead to toxic or otherwise destructive gender constructions’ and ‘postcolonial theory seeks to address this on a broad scale’ (Chapter 5, p. 81). While studies have tended to concentrate on this with respect to its impact on women and the negative impact of conservative Christianity, more recently masculinities are also being considered. Taking the Filipino example of the
representation of Mary and Jesus as the *Birhen sa Balintawak* (Mother of Balintawak) and her ‘Holy Child’, he ‘shows the subversive potential of religious traditions when it comes to constructing “alternative” genders, in this case masculinities’ (Chapter 5, p. 67). This example demonstrates how the ‘indigenous appropriation of traditional colonial religious repertoire’ means that colonial religion ‘becomes indigenized and the property of the colonized, rather than of the colonizers’ (Chapter 5, p. 68).

Also drawing on examples of ‘lived religion’, in ‘Buddhist Nuns and Agency in Myanmar’, Sneha Roy discusses the tension between structure and agency through the lived experiences of *thilashins* (ordained Buddhist women in Myanmar). While subservient to the male monastics within their tradition and the patriarchal structures of Buddhism, these women have been key figures in movements responding to political instability in Myanmar, including in the most recent 2021 uprisings following the military coup. They view their activism as a way to strategise their agency and identity, thereby challenging the simplistic binary between structure and agency. Where their ‘civil voluntarism establishes a dialectical relationship between constraint and agency’ as they engage in activism ‘against the unjust discernments of the state’ and ‘those they categorise as a threat to the propagation of *sangha* and *sāsana* [Buddhist community and teachings]’ (Chapter 6, p. 99).

In ‘Reclaiming Public and Digital Spaces: The Conundrum of Acceptance for the Feminist Movement in Pakistan’, Sehrish Mushtaq and Fawad Baig examine the construction of the notion of the public sphere and public spaces as discursive and real locations to which, in a liberal society, all individuals regardless of gender, religion, class and race ought to have equal access. In reality, however, women in many societies are not able to participate equally with men in public spaces and are instead relegated to the private, domestic realm, with religious narratives playing a role in the maintenance of this public-private binary. A key aim of feminist movements is to reclaim public spaces, to enable women to assert their human rights and to engage in democratic processes to secure their demands. In recent years, digital spaces have increased women’s scope to resist and challenge patriarchy, in conjunction with offline activities, while at the same time ‘digital spaces are also gendered in nature and have reinforced traditional gender roles’ (Chapter 7, p. 105). Taking the example of the ‘Aurat March’ (women’s march) in Pakistan, the authors examine how feminists have been using digital spaces, as well as the physical act of marching and protesting, to further their aims and to reclaim agency, alongside consideration of the online responses they received from members of the public. Also looking at women’s agency online, Rosemary Hancock in ‘Social Media and Online Environments: Muslim and Mormon Women Bloggers in the United States of America’ discusses the findings from her study of blogging by 13 Muslim and Mormon women in the USA. The study demonstrates that the offline world of religious communities also plays a role in shaping activity online, despite the opportunities that the internet provides for challenging authority, including religious authority. She concludes, ‘the complexity of the debates on women’s agency within religion is evident in the blogs in this study’ and ‘agency, both in terms of resistance and as embodied in conservative religion, both forms of agency ‘can exist within the same religious community simultaneously’ (Chapter 8, p. 119).

Spatial considerations are a focus of the next two chapters. In ‘Space, Boundaries and Borders in the Study of Religion, Gender and Society’, Orlando Woods focuses on theoretical advances brought about by the ‘spatial turn’ in the study of religion, where the ‘conceptual tools of space, boundaries and borders help to unravel the “fluidity and instability in social identities” (Dwyer et al. 2008: 121)’ including gender (Chapter 9, p. 140). He examines how religiously gendered bodies use space to resist secular norms when, for instance, women wear the Muslim veil in secular settings such as France. At the same time, other women strategically use public
spaces to signify their refusal to conform to religious ideals, again through their choice of clothing. Beyond such symbolic acts in real spaces, Woods also examines the impact of women crossing physical borders when they migrate. Taking the example of Muslim women from Harari communities in Ethiopia migrating to Toronto, Canada, he notes that rather than bringing ‘about a liberalisation of gender roles . . . the reverse was observed’ where religious roles and spaces for both men and women became more prescriptive and polarised (Chapter 9, p. 145).

This focus on space and bodies is also reflected in the chapter by Mariecke van den Berg: ‘Bodies and Embodiment: The Somatic Turn in the Study of Religion and Gender’. She notes, ‘Centuries of Protestant domination in the West and beyond has left us with a tendency, both in the study of religion and in Western society as a whole, to favour doctrine over ritual, belief over practice, faith over the body and the senses’ (Chapter 10, p. 149). Moreover, feminist theory has tended to have an uneasy relationship with the body, where there has been a reluctance to engage with it out of concern not to play into binaries (e.g. body/mind) that serve to disadvantage women. Van den Berg argues, ‘it is possible to retell the story of the body differently’ and to avoid the extremes of denying or essentializing women’s bodies where feminist theory has developed an intersectional framework that enables critical reflection of and critique on dualist thinking that constructs women, people of colour and sexual minorities as inferior, without reproducing negative attitudes towards the body and emphasizing the fluidity and changing nature of bodies.

(Chapter 10, p. 152)

The final two chapters in the ‘critical debates’ section take us to methodological considerations around how we research gender and religion. In ‘Narrative Approaches to Religion and Gender: A Biographic Study with Christian Youn Men’, Joshua M. Heyes examines the role of a ‘narrative approach’ as an ‘activist orientation to religion and gender research’. While ‘nested’ within other approaches taken by religion and gender scholars, including ethnography, discourse analysis and visual methods, narrative approaches are focused on ‘how humans make meaning.’ Specifically using a ‘biographic narrative interpretive method (BNIM)’ to find out more about how the connections between Christianity and masculinity are experienced and understood by young men who are part of independent evangelical churches in urban areas of England, he demonstrates how the narrative method ‘supports the important project of widening the range of ways that gendered religious lives can be communicated and known about’ (Chapter 11, p. 172).

In Chapter 12, ‘When My Work Is Found Wanting: Power, Intersectionality, Postcolonialism, and the Reflexive Feminist Researcher’, Dawn Llewellyn examines the critical theme of reflexivity and its significance for feminist scholarship on religion and gender, especially following the postcolonial turn. Through a critical and honest examination of the limits of reflexivity, Llewellyn explores ‘how I have tried, sometimes come close, and sometimes failed to action reflexivity rigorously’ (p. 176) and the impact of her methodological decisions and omissions. Although reflexivity is often viewed as the feminist answer to ‘identifying and highlighting how power is distributed’ through research, Llewellyn questions the ways it has been applied in scholarship on religion and gender, including in her own work on Christian women and childlessness (Chapter 12, p. 176). Llewellyn strongly makes the case for the ongoing importance of reflexivity in research, including giving attention to where her reflexivity has been insufficiently intersectional and why ongoing attention to ‘multiple expressions of advantage’, including in relation to race, gender, disability, age, and class, needs to remain a critical feature of feminist research in religion (Chapter 12, p. 181).
Part 2 of the book includes 13 chapters on key issues and themes in the study of religion, gender and society. We begin this section with two chapters that draw attention to the ways in which religion shapes normative understandings about acceptable gender roles, gender identity and sexual orientation that confound a simple binary between progressive and conservative. In ‘Butch Lesbians, Femme Queens and Promiscuous Clergy: Queering the Body Politics of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa [MCSA]’, Megan Robertson juxtaposes the way that the MCSA views itself as liberal and progressive, when in 2019 it welcomed its first woman bishop, against an earlier event in 2009 when the Church excommunicated a female minister for her decision to marry her same-sex partner. This, she argues, demonstrates how ‘the Church’s progressive gender activism is deeply limited by the kind of woman, and indeed clergy, it envisages for its transformative agenda’ (Chapter 13, p. 204). In her chapter ‘Gender Variance and the Abrahamic Faiths’, Susannah Cornwall examines how within Judaism, Islam and Christianity there are both more conservative and more liberal attitudes towards gender transition and that theological conservatism about gender roles and sexual orientation does not necessarily entail a conservative attitude towards altering the sex one was assigned at birth. While approaches to pastoral care for trans people can be mixed, each religion has conceptual space for consideration of gender variance (Chapter 14).

The next two chapters take marriage and the family as their starting points. In ‘Migration and Law in the Middle East and North Africa’, Nadia Sonneveld examines the legal aspects of South–South migration in the Middle East, with a particular focus on the impact of religion-based family laws within Catholicism and Islam on the position of migrants with respect to major life events, including marriage and childbirth. She demonstrates how, for Catholic and Muslim Syrian refugees, ‘family laws in the region strongly distinguish on the basis of gender and religion’ (Chapter 15, p. 223). She also deals with the ways in which religion in combination with legal frameworks can serve as a source of discrimination for people of different genders and sexual orientations. Sarah-Jane Page, in her chapter ‘Religion and Intimate Life: Marriage, Family, Sexuality’, explores the relationship between religion and ‘intimate life’ in the UK, with special attention to marriage. While heterosexual couples ‘typically understand marriage as a marker of adulthood that is expected of them from their families and religious communities’, despite some ambivalence towards the gendered constraints of marriage, the situation is more complex for queer couples (Chapter 16, p. 244). For instance, although changes in legislation in the UK mean that marriage between same-sex partners is now allowed, same-sex marriage is not currently legally permitted on Church of England premises.

The next two chapters take the theme of different generations as their starting point. In ‘Age, Gender and De–churchisation’, Abby Day adopts a ‘lens of generational clash and change’ to compare the religious observance of elderly Anglican women in the UK and Canada and their Baby Boomer generation offspring. While the role of the Baby Boomers in the ‘generational decline in Euro–American Christianity’ is well known, much less attention has been paid to their religiously inclined mothers and how they navigate changing dynamics within the Anglican Church and the secularisation of society more broadly (Chapter 17, p. 249). Following this, Rachael Shillitoe and Céline Benoit focus on ‘Gender, Religion and Childhood: Towards a New Research Agenda’ and address the lack of research that focuses on children as active agents and as able to speak for themselves with respect to their religious identities. Taking the family and school settings as a starting point, they examine the factors that impact upon the interactions between religion and gender identities and call for further research that looks at diverse family types (i.e. ‘single-parent families, same-sex parents and households with carers...')
or nonfamily members as the primary carers’), as well as informal educational settings (such as after-school clubs), and broadens its focus beyond a European and North American context (Chapter 18, p. 270).

Also looking at an educational setting, this time a college for high school graduates (18–20 years old), Aura Di Febo writes about a school set up by Risshō Kōseikai, a lay Buddhist organisation, in 1994, called Hōju Josei Gakuin Jōhō Kokusai Senmon Gakkō. In her chapter, ‘Mothers, Bodhisattvas and Women of Tomorrow: Religiously Connoted Gender Roles in a Buddhist Vocational School in Japan’, she examines the role of this school in training ‘women that could contribute to contemporary society’ through the nurturing of Buddhist feminine values of ‘compassion and docility’ thereby reinforcing ‘conservative ideals of femininity centred on the notion of women as carers’ (Chapter 19, p. 276). However, Di Febo demonstrates that it would be limiting ‘to read these dynamics as mere reproduction and interiorisation of structures of subordination’ and that ‘acceptance of conservative gender norms allows these women also to gain some agency over their personal development, interpersonal relationships and social participation’ (Chapter 19, p. 276). Thus, this example of Buddhist vocational education is both a ‘potential resource for female empowerment’ and a site for the ‘reproduction of conservative social norms’ (Chapter 19, p. 276). Paola Cavaliere in ‘Articulating the Neoliberal Motherhood Discourse: Visions of Gender in Japanese New Religions’ also looks at Risshō Kōseikai but alongside two additional Japanese ‘new religions’, one Buddhist (Sōka Gakkai) and the other not linked to any particular religious tradition, although sometimes drawing upon Buddhist language (God Light Association (GLA)). She examines how women in Japan are increasingly expected to perform intensive mothering roles alongside participation in the neoliberal marketplace and how these ‘Japanese new religions become places where moral conversations on how to achieve both goals can take place’ (Chapter 20, p. 289).

The theme of how religion can shape women’s expected roles in society continues in ‘Women, Religion and the State: A Gendered Analysis of the Catholic Church, the State and the Rise of Evangelical Protestantism on Women’s Roles and Women’s Rights in Brazil’. Kim Beecheno outlines that when Brazil saw its first democratically elected civilian president in over 20 years take office in 1985, some of the inequalities between men and women established by Catholic teachings began to be challenged. A National Council on Women’s Rights was set up and in the new constitution in 1988 men and women ‘became constitutionally equal in rights and status for the first time’ (Chapter 21, p. 313). More women entered the workplace, fertility rates fell and women were more likely to gain a university education. More recently, however, the rise of what Beecheno calls ‘Christian fundamentalism’ in the form of the growth of conservative Evangelical Protestantism coupled with the election of the far-right President Jair Bolsonaro, who was elected in January 2019, seriously threatens the rights of women and LGBTQI+ people.

The final cluster of chapters in part 2 of the volume each explore the importance of thinking about religion alongside gender in different activist and policy fields. In ‘Religion, Gender Justice, Violence, and Peace’, Atalia Omer examines relationships between gender, religion, violence and peace. On the one hand, religion tends to be left out of discussions about gender, peace and violence, not least because of its association with hetero-patriarchal patterns of domination, violence and exploitation. On the other hand, scholarship on religion, conflict and the practice of peace has tended to avoid the topic of gender, for appearing as ‘gratuitous, luxurious, and unrelated to the hard realities at hand’ (Chapter 22, p. 323). Importantly, there is a ‘continuum of violence’ for women in war and peace. Through a series of narratives, she demonstrates the ‘layered, multidirectional, and cross-fertilizing’ relationships between gender, religion, violence and peace (Chapter 22, p. 321). Also focusing on violence against women, Johanna Stiebert in her chapter
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‘Religion and Sexual Violence’ similarly discusses how religion is left out of discussions about gender-based and sexual violence. Examining sexual violence in religion texts, in religiously motivated wars and in religious institutions, she advocates the term ‘religious sexual violence’ as a ‘legitimate designation for a complex and variegated phenomenon’ (Chapter 23, p. 339).

In ‘Religion, Gender and International Development: Searching for Game Changers in the Midst of Polarization’, Brenda Bartelink examines how, in the field of international development, religion tends to be approached with caution and in particular seen as an impediment to women’s rights. This polarisation between religion and gender is not an invention of the international development sphere, but has instead been imported from wider political and feminist discourses. Through exploring ‘voices in the middle’—religious feminism and gender programming by religious NGOs—who ‘work across religious/secular binaries’, Bartelink demonstrates how these actors play an important role in negotiating women’s human rights in a polarised world (Chapter 24, p. 357).

In ‘A Decological Way to Dialogue: Rethinking Ecofeminism and Religion’, Elaine Nogueira-Godsey writes about the ecofeminist recognition that there is a ‘connection between gender and sexual oppression and the destruction of the Earth’ that emerged in the 1970s. Although largely dismissed by Northern feminists by the 1990s for its apparent essentialisation of women as close to nature and its connection with spirituality/religion, she argues that the dismissal of the significance of religion and gender to the liberation of women and the earth itself is reflective of the ‘dominator-subordinated mode of relationships’. The dismissal of ecofeminism is as much a product of a Northern feminist bias that views religion as irrational and an inferior mode of knowledge, thereby reinscribing masculine and colonialist oppression, as it is a concern about essentialising women (Chapter 25, p. 365).

Part 3: Contexts and Locations

Our final set of chapters, part 3 of the volume, are organised around locations, with two chapters focusing on each of the following settings—Europe, North America, Latin America, South Asia, East/Southeast Asia, Middle East and North Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa and Oceania (16 chapters in total). The first chapter in each setting focuses on an overview of issues around gender, religion and society in that location, and the second focuses on issues to do with men/masculinities, gender and religion.

In ‘Religion and Gender in Europe: Thinking through Politico-social and Theoretical Challenges’, Nella van den Brandt outlines how, despite the secularisation of Europe following the Enlightenment, many commentators now draw attention to an apparent ‘return of religion’, including from Muslim immigrants, but also increasing Christian conservatism, particularly in Central, Southern, and Eastern Europe, that exists in part as a reaction against ‘gender studies and policymaking that aims at enlarging and supporting the equal opportunities and empowerment of women and LGBTQ persons’ (Chapter 26, p. 392). She argues that ‘future discussions about religion and gender in Europe should be interdisciplinary, conceptual, comparative, and intersectional’ and that we have to focus on ‘de-compartmentalising our discussions in order to arrive at innovative and nuanced understandings of gender and religion’ (Chapter 26, p. 394). Through an examination of the representation of women leaving religiously orthodox communities in two films, both of which promote the view that the only option for women is to move away from their static and orthodox traditions to adopt the values of a modern liberal society, she criticises the binary between orthodox and liberal. Rather than change and accommodation being possible within orthodox traditions, a situation that actually reflects the complex lived reality, such representations tend to rely on
oversimplifications. In ‘Religion and Masculinities in Europe’, Stephen Hunt similarly takes a Europe-wide approach, rather than focusing on one country or region of Europe. Like van den Brandt, he identifies rising nationalist/populist forms of politics, drawing on conservative religious frameworks as presenting a challenge to liberal and secularising influences in Western Europe since the Second World War and Central and Eastern Europe since the fall of communism. He explores the gender gap in male and female religiosity, the way that conventional established religious authorities have shaped hegemonic visions of masculinity that are now being challenged by non-conventional forms of masculinity offered within the ‘spiritual marketplace’ of new religions, and the types of masculinity within newer migrant ethnic and religious groups (Chapter 27).

Danielle Marie Dempsey picks up the European story in North America in her chapter ‘The Legacy of Colonialism and the Regulation of Gender in North America’, which examines how European colonisation forcefully introduced Christianity in the region along with ‘strictly regimented gender norms, which simultaneously served to reinforce whiteness, cis-maleness, and heterosexuality, the effects of which are still visible in North American religions and society today’ (Chapter 28, p. 415). The mistreatment and mass murder of non-white communities in North America was justified with reference to the Bible and although today ‘settler colonialism’ has been replaced by the nation-state, ‘the deep-seated relationship between colonialism and Christianity remained’ (Chapter 28, p. 415). She argues that this ‘structurally entrenched relationship calls into question narratives of nationhood, citizenship, and whether people of non-dominant genders and non-Christians in North America are truly a part of or apart from “American” society’ (Chapter 28, p. 415). Ronald Neal in ‘Troubling the Demonic: Anti-Blackness, Heterosexual Black Masculinity, and the Study of Religion in North America’ focuses on an ‘American imaginary’ that portrays black men in demonic terms and the impact of religion and colonialism on this. He demonstrates how this demonic imaginary is at work in portrayals of black men in cultural production as well as policy frameworks. In particular he draws attention to the role that ‘the biblical justification of slavery and the Eurocentric nature of the study of religions since the 19th century’ have had upon constructing a binary between civilised/uncivilised as well as the contribution of feminist and queer scholarship to the portrayal of heterosexual black men in demonic terms (Chapter 29, p. 429).

In ‘Religion and Gender Dynamics in Latin American Societies’, Ana Lourdes Suárez addresses how the Catholic Church in Latin America has prohibited women ordaining and taking on leadership roles. Instead, the ‘women religious’, the nuns or sisters who chose to commit their lives to the Church, perform roles that are shaped by the patriarchal Church and reflect women’s caring gendered roles in society more broadly. Despite the independent role that many ‘women religious’ carved out for themselves in working with the poor, a key element of the liberation theology ‘option for the poor’ in the 1980s, they were unable to gain leverage within the hierarchy of the Catholic Church and remained subordinate to male priests. Feminist theology from the 1970s began to have an impact upon how some ‘women religious’ viewed their position and they developed a more critical voice, while others became part of a ‘conservative counter-offensive’. In recent decades Catholicism has lost its earlier dominance with the rise of Evangelical and Pentecostal Christianity as well as religious change also occurring at the margins of institutional churches through ‘New Age, neo-pagan, neo-Indian, neo-esoteric, and self-styled religions’ (Chapter 30, p. 449). While Pentecostalism in particular is challenging the ‘increasing flexible understandings in gender issues in wider Latin American society’ the rise of ‘new spiritualities’ has brought with it a questioning of traditional gender roles and identities. She ends her chapter with a discussion of the #NiUnaMenos (Not One Less) movement, which has become a vehicle for campaigning against femicide as well as for other gender activism issues.
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linked to patriarchy, which in turn is underpinned by the Catholic tradition in Latin America. André S. Musskopf begins his chapter, ‘Latin America—Religion, Gender, Masculinities and Sexual Diversity’, by discussing violence against women and the reaction to this in a song by Chilean activist group Colectivo Lastesis, ‘The Rapist Is You’. This song makes a statement about ‘the role of men, the need to question and review how gender and sexual relations are organized and how institutions produce, maintain and reproduce those systems’ (Chapter 31, p. 458). Musskopf explores the trajectory of the academic study of ‘gender, masculinities and sexual diversity in relation to religion and theology in Latin America’ as a response to the scenario expressed by Colectivo Lastesis.

In ‘Women, Religion and Social Inequality in India: Intersectionality, Nationalism and Religious Change’, Emma Tomalin examines the impact of Hinduism and Islam in India, a setting with high levels of socio-economic inequality, on women’s religious and social lives. Moreover, although high levels of religiosity in India also coincide with high levels of gender inequality, the impact of religion needs to be considered in interaction with a broad range of factors, including ‘amongst others, caste, class, ethnicity, politics, geographical location and occupation/livelihood’ (Chapter 32, p. 471). In addition to these intersectional factors, the impact of religion on women’s lives in India is also a product of the relationship between religions, particularly ‘where the rise of Hindu nationalism shapes how other religions respond and reconfigure. . . “resulting in the politicization of gender identities and the co-option of women’s bodies as symbols and repositories of community and national identity”’ (Desai and Temsah 2014: 7; Chapter 32, p. 471). Sikata Banerjee also picks up the important theme of Hindu nationalism and focuses on its impact on Hindu masculinities. In her chapter ‘Hindu Muscular Nationalism: Politicized Hinduism and Manhood in India’, she explores the role of the Hindu Nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (or BJP), currently in government in India, which ‘has been marked by the use of a particularly aggressive and martial interpretation of manhood’ (Chapter 33, p. 486). She traces the evolution of muscular Hindu nationalism to one of the founding fathers of the movement, V.D. Savarkar, in the colonial period, and then draws on interviews and archival material from India and Britain to unpack this ‘message of muscular Hindu nationalism focused on retrieving Hindu pride and strength’ and to explore its impact on women and religious minorities (Chapter 33, p. 487).

Hollie Gowan, in her chapter ‘“A Monster Had Eaten Me Whole”: Religiously Inspired Charitable Organisations (RICOs) as “Retreat” for Women in Contemporary Urban China’, points out the ‘“daunting silences” when it comes to religious studies and gender studies focusing on the Chinese context’ (Chapter 34, p. 499), despite the fact that women make up the majority of religious adherents there. She is interested in better understanding the motivations and experiences of women who join RICOs and the impact that this has upon the way that they make sense of their lives against the pressure of and tension between traditional and modernising forces. Teguh Wijaya Mulya and Joseph N. Goh in their chapter ‘Masculinities and Religion in Southeast Asia’ begin by outlining some of the diverse ways that religion shapes masculinities globally: from the portrayal of ‘stronger masculine imageries of the divine . . . commensurate with more conservative and traditional ideologies of gender’ (Chapter 35, p. 514); to an ‘appreciation for “gentler” masculine traits expressed for instance through men embracing Buddhist mindfulness to ameliorate overwhelming masculine anxieties in contemporary Western societies’; and the ambivalent stance across religions towards ‘men who embody gender and sexual diversities’ (Chapter 35, p. 515). Their chapter adds to this corpus of work, with attention to masculinities and religion in Southeast Asia through six themes: ‘everyday performances of masculinity, competing versions of masculinity, sacred intermediaries, nation-state, and sexuality and violence’ (Chapter 35, p. 522).
In ‘Reform, Continuities and Conservatism in the Middle East and North Africa’, An Van Raemdonck takes a region-wide look at the ways that region has shaped gender roles in the MENA region while at the same time avoiding ‘such methodological pitfalls in which religion is either predominantly emancipatory or disempowering, or either ignored or reified as an all-encompassing conceptual lens’ (Chapter 36, p. 526). She looks at the colonial and postcolonial shaping of the family, the important social role of young people and the impact of changing moralities around love and new (reproductive) technologies, as well as attempts to re-traditionalise society and how Islamic feminism has responded to this. Also writing on the MENA region but with a closer focus on Egypt, Anwar Mhajne, in ‘Toward a Comprehensive Approach to Understanding the Construction of Islamic Masculinities in the Middle East and North Africa’ (Chapter 37), is critical of the ways in which some scholars and analysts of the MENA region rely on problematic theories about masculinity and invoke a racialised narrative of toxic Arab Muslim masculinity. She discusses the historical roots of such racialised narratives, and the way that they are used to account for social problems in the MENA region, as reflecting colonial structures. The chapter concludes with a discussion of recent trends in the study of Islamic masculinities.

In ‘Exploring Tensions: Gender and Religion in Sub-Saharan Africa’, Elisabet le Roux and Nadine Bowers Du Toit explore three key tensions that arise at the intersection between religion, gender and society in the region. First, they examine ‘the tensions between religion and culture’ through looking at how Christianity, Islam and African Traditional Religions interact with culture in ways that are ‘both liberative and oppressive with regards to gender and development issues’ (Chapter 38, p. 552). Second, they explore the ‘tension between women’s agency and women’s complicity in gender oppression’, a key focus in this volume overall. Third, they examine ‘the tension between men and women’s participation in establishing gender equity’ and the challenges of engaging with patriarchal structures in religions in order to bring about change (Chapter 38, p. 551). Benjamin Kirby and Adriaan van Klinken take a closer look at the impact of religion on men in their chapter ‘Religions and Masculinities in Africa: Power, Politics, Performance’, which points to the ways in which African masculinities are often portrayed in terms of ‘crises’. Despite problems with the alarmist nature of such a depiction, they suggest that religion is one of the ways which men navigate ‘social, cultural, economic, and political change’ (Chapter 39, p. 566). They provide an overview of the topic of religions and masculinities in Africa and draw on their ethnographic research in Zambia and Tanzania in terms of the three themes of ‘power, politics, and performance’ (Chapter 39, p. 567).

The final region discussed in the volume is Oceania, and the section begins with Anna Hallaffoff and Kathleen McPhillips’ chapter ‘Women and Religion in Oceania’. They acknowledge the ‘rich histories of cultural, religious and linguistic diversity’, from the original Indigenous peoples to later explorers, colonisers and economic migrants (Chapter 40, p. 576). They provide a historical overview of the religion, gender and society nexus in the region and then discuss two case studies of Christian and Buddhist women in Australia. They focus on ‘structural violence’ against women in the region and the role that religion plays in this, as well as how it is being addressed by both men and women, ‘at times with the support of both offline and online international social movements campaigning for gender parity’ (Chapter 40, p. 576). Joshua Roose, in his chapter ‘Masculinity, Religion, Rugby and Society in Oceania’, also notes how ‘it is difficult to talk uniformly about matters of religion or masculinity in the region’ and that ‘One must think creatively to seek to distil the concepts of masculinity and religion into a cohesive and substantive discussion’ (Chapter 41, p. 593). Cleverly taking the theme of sport as the focus, rugby specifically, he argues that the ‘Rugby playing fields, clubrooms and boardrooms are arguably the key site of interaction between men (and increasingly women) of the constituent nations of Oceania’ (Chapter 41, p. 593). Young men from the Pacific islands see rugby as a
route out of poverty as they take up positions in New Zealand or Australia, in a sport where for players from Indigenous backgrounds in particular the ‘intersection of religion and masculinity is powerful’ (Chapter 41, p. 593). He discusses the sacking of the Australian Wallaby’s fullback, Israel Folau (of Tongan heritage), following his ‘posting of religiously inspired anti-homosexual Twitter messages’ (Chapter 41, p. 594). This brought to the surface tensions between ‘the tolerance for public displays of religion by Pacific Island rugby players’ and ‘secular Australia driven by neoliberal economic imperatives’ and became ‘the key case central to the development of freedom of religion legislation in Australia’ (Chapter 41, p. 594).

What the chapters in this volume demonstrate amply is the richness and variety inherent in any study of religion, gender and society in both global and local manifestations. Despite the dominance of secularisation paradigms, it is clear that there remains a powerful role for religion in shaping contemporary gendered expectations and experiences, and this is showing no sign of abating, even in so-called secular contexts. The chapters in this volume demonstrate the ongoing need to understand the complexities, tensions and local specificities of religion and gender in the contemporary world and the importance of questioning any universalised understandings of concepts such as agency, oppression, power and liberation.

Notes

1 Although on the whole unsatisfactory designations, the terms Global South and Global North are socio-economic and political categories that make a distinction between countries that are more economically developed in the ‘North’, and incidentally more secularised, and those that are less economically developed in the ‘South’, and incidentally tend to have higher levels of religiosity. The designation does not neatly align to the geographical spaces of the northern and southern hemispheres, and some ‘developed’ countries are in the South and vice versa. However, it seeks to replace the outdated colonialist language of first and third world, or developed and developing countries, for suggesting a norm to which other countries had to catch up to, in order to be viewed as progressive and modern (see Lees 2021). There is a move towards replacing this language with the designation ‘minority’ and ‘majority’ worlds, to reflect the regions where smaller and larger populations reside, but this is less well known to date (see https://borgenproject.org/tag/majority-world/).

2 This is written in the singular to refer to a body of theories about secularisation that assumes the decline of religion both in the public sphere and in people’s private lives is an inevitable outcome of modernity and modernisation, rather than to suggest that there is only one theory about secularisation.

Bibliography


