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THE FEMINISM CONUNDRUM

A contested term for the study of religion and gender

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Feminists need and will always have antagonistic relationships not only with the world but among themselves. Don’t swamp with paralyzing doubt what might be your small piece of the larger, evolving project. Feminism is a sensibility, subject to constant revision, but very portable. Even as you change you can take it with you.

*Ann Sutow, The Feminism of Uncertainty: A Gender Diary (2015, 14)*

Introduction

What does it mean to study religion, gender and society in a distinctively feminist way? What are the core issues at stake, and are there any particular ‘guidelines’ that can be offered to the feminist scholar of religion? The main argument of this chapter is that despite the announcement of a ‘post-secular turn in feminist theory’ over the past decade, the tensions between feminism and religion within the broader interdisciplinary field of women’s, gender and feminist studies still affect and put certain limits on the way in which religion and gender is often analysed. This involves a lack of exchange across disciplinary divides contributing to persistent limitations in our theories and methodologies. Feminism remains a highly contested term and a ‘conundrum’ in the study of religion and gender, in large part, and quite simply, because ‘religion’ remains a conundrum for feminism. Generally speaking, women have not fared well in many of the world’s patriarchal religions. Hence the long-held assumption that religion would be antithetical to struggles for their well-being and incompatible with any understanding of gender equality or gender justice. Many feminist activists and scholars remain suspect and critical of, if not downright reject, ‘religion’ (Jeffreys 2013; Aune et al. 2017; Reilly 2017). This assumption has obviously affected the study of religion and gender, although as I will unpack in this chapter, it has played out in different ways depending on the scholar’s standpoint and positioning in terms of theoretical and methodological framework, disciplinary location and even personal identity in relation to one’s work (as secular, religious, agnostic, etc.).

Where does the feminist study of religion and gender stand today? In their introduction to *Contemporary Encounters in Gender and Religion: European Perspectives*, Lena Gemzöe, Marja-Liisa Keinänen and Avril Maddrell (2016, 2) refer to the potential of a ‘new relationship between feminist studies and studies of religion’, drawing on the case of a recent public manifestation of solidarity between secular and religious women following the mediatized street assault of a
Muslim woman wearing the hijab in the city of Stockholm. However, they also note that the effect of what Ursula King (2005) once referred to as a ‘double blindness’ between the study of religion and the study of gender lingers on, despite the progress that has been made. The relationship between religion and gender, King (2005, 1) argues, is on the one hand marked by inattentiveness to ‘religion’ in ‘most contemporary gender studies, whether in the humanities, social sciences or natural sciences’. At the same time, she claimed many studies in religion continue to profoundly disregard the subject of gender (King 2005, 1–2). The existence of a gap between religion and gender is also emphasized in more recent times by feminist scholars of religion. Dawn Llewellyn and Marta Trzebiatowska (2013), for example, similarly refer to King’s metaphor of ‘double blindness’, yet prefer to replace it with the less ableist, problematic and more neutral signifier of ‘negligence’. The authors draw attention to another divide, namely within feminism with regards to the role of religion, arguing a ‘disciplinary disconnection’ perseveres between ‘secular feminisms’ and ‘religious feminisms’. This disaccord, they claim, is replicated in the academy by a lack of dialogue between women’s, gender and feminist studies on the one hand, who ‘neglect’ religion, and the field of ‘feminist studies in religion, spirituality and theology’ on the other.

Thus, while the mainstream (or ‘malestream’) study of religion lacks attention for gender, and at first sight this would seem to resonate with other disciplines that to varying degrees have responded to feminist critique, something additional seems at hand when it comes to the ‘religion conundrum’ in feminism. The field of women’s, gender studies and feminist analysis also appears internally divided; either you are a feminist scholar located and working—somewhat isolated—within the study of religion, spirituality or theology; or a secular feminist researcher who neglects—and possibly rejects—the affirmative potential of religion in gendered human life, particularly in regards to women’s freedom and liberation.

In this chapter I aim to unpack some of these limitations and mutual disconnections, which can ultimately be traced to the contentious relationship between ‘feminism’—the modernist struggle for gender equality—and ‘religion’; which on the whole, historically and cross-culturally, has not been particularly known for or conducive to the advancement of gender and sexual liberty. Although the presumed incompatibility between religion and gender equality is increasingly questioned, I show how its recent framing—for example in terms of a ‘post-secular turn in feminist theory’—tends to be somewhat selective and partial. Like Llewellyn and Trzebiatowska (2013) stress, there is a much longer herstory of feminist critical and constructive approaches to religion, which are often unknown and/or ignored. Despite the recent surge of interest in social studies of ‘women’s religious agency’ and openness towards the ‘non-secular’, I also maintain that certain secularist yet also unacknowledged ‘religionist’ assumptions remain entrenched in the study of religion and gender today. This leads to a ‘feminism conundrum’ which requires further debate and reflection on what it means to study religion and gender in a distinctively feminist way. Many of the tenacious disconnections relate to the place from where one is situated, speaks and undertakes one’s research, across the wide spectrum of social sciences and humanities from which religion and gender can be studied.

The chapter is structured as follows. I first discuss the emergence of the study of gender in the fields of religious studies and theology, proceeding with a brief overview of developments in the study of religion and gender in the social sciences. I then reflect on the novelty and limitations of the ‘post-secular turn in feminist theory’ epitomized by the analytical lens of ‘agency’ in recent religion and gender research. I end with a call for more interdisciplinary engagement and suggest that for feminist scholars of religion, it is paramount, in mutual dialogue and a reflexive way, to take our politics of location into account.
The feminism conundrum

Androcentric methodology and patriarchal religion

In order to unpack the limitations that linger, and the cause and possible ways out of the disconnections that persevere, I return to the aforementioned Ursula King’s diagnosis of a disregard for questions of gender that for a long time held sway in the mainstream study of religion. Over the past decade or two, several authors located in the discipline of ‘religious studies’ across North America and north-western Europe working on gender have repeatedly stressed how their discipline was insulated from ‘gender critical perspectives’. There has been much resistance to the ‘engendering’ of the mainstream study of religion, which, if at all, has proceeded at a much slower pace compared to many other disciplines in the social sciences and humanities (Longman 2003; Warne 2000; King 2005; Hawthorne 2009; Calef and Simkins 2009; Heller 2008).

Pleas for a ‘gender critical turn’ in the study of religion have involved pointing out how blatantly evident it is that ‘religion’ is a gendered phenomenon with a profound impact on human life; across history, cultures and societies, in domains ranging from ethics, law, ritual and politics, and experienced and expressed in material culture, literature, mythology and philosophy. Whether we are concerned with contemporary organized forms of tradition, such as the ‘world religions’, or smaller traditions, from ‘indigenous religions’ to new spiritual and religious movements, religion in modern societies often crosses group boundaries such as ethnicity and the nation and functions as a vehicle of identity dynamics from local to global scales. Religious membership and belonging can serve as a source for structure, belief and praxis. It can aid ‘making sense’ of and giving purpose or meaning to one’s life, such as in more individualized forms of ‘religious’ expression like contemporary spirituality and holistic well-being. Yet as many feminist activists and scholars have emphasized, religious texts, myths, doctrines and liturgies are often strongly imbued with power relations that are gendered. Legal and ethical codes often prescribe different behaviour and rights for women and men, and specialist roles and responsibilities within religious communities and organizations—more often than not—fall along hierarchical—male elitist—gender lines. Religious traditions, laws and ideologies circumscribe or affect human experience in ways that are deeply gendered and are often very patriarchal and heteronormative, pertaining to domains of kinship, embodiment, reproduction and sexuality.

Nonetheless, parallel to the critique of many ‘malestream’ disciplines following the impact of the women’s emancipation movement in the academy towards the end of the last century (Warren 1989; O’Brien 1983), the field of religious studies was put under scrutiny by feminist voices from within the field for effectively ignoring half of the population. Theologians from Christian and Jewish traditions and religious studies scholars working across a variety of religious traditions set out to rediscover, reinterpret, reform and reconstruct religions grounded in women’s experiences and from feminist perspectives (Christ 1992; Gross 1977; O’Connor 1995; Daly 1985; Plaskow 1991; Ruether 1993; Fiorenza et al. 2003; Solle 1993; Halkes 1991; Wadud 1999). In Beyond Androcentrism: New Essays on Women and Religion scholar of Buddhism, Rita Gross (1977, 10), for example, remarked that in the study of religion women are often curiously ‘discussed as an object exterior to mankind, needing to be explained and fitted into one’s worldview, having the same ontological status as trees, unicorns, deities or any other object that must be discussed to make experience intelligible’. In later work, Gross (2009, 55) reiterated her claims that androcentric methodology caused ‘serious deficiencies’ in the study of religion, ‘at the primary level of data-perception and gathering’, which in turn ‘generates serious deficiencies at the level of model-building and theorizing’.

Mirroring developments in other disciplines and the shift from women’s studies to gender studies more generally, the call for the inclusion of ‘women’ as religious subjects worthy of study
was followed by a call for a reconceptualization of the study of religion from the more encompassing perspective of gender analysis. Again, feminist scholars in religious studies have lamented the way their discipline seemed so resistant. In Religion and Gender, one of the rare handbooks that was available at the time of my own doctoral studies, Ursula King (1995) claimed that opposed to some of the advances made in other disciplines, a ‘paradigm shift’ towards integrating questions of gender had not yet taken place in the study of religion. What is referred to as a ‘gender critical turn’ in the study of religion, it has been proposed, involves employing ‘gender as a key analytical category for how we think about religion, what we consider to be data, and what questions we bring to our studies’ (Warne 2000, 249). While assessments of androcentrism, gender obliviousness and the impact of gendered critique in the academy are not unique, the question remains why the mainstream study of religion appears to be a particularly difficult and resistant case.

Of course, one could, in a straightforward way, ascribe the historically male dominant focus in the study of religion to the historically male dominant—and often patriarchal—character of many if not most of the world’s religions. However, I argue that what is not often reflected on, and therefore is lacking in discussions on the status of religion and gender research, are questions of particular disciplinary situatedness, training, paradigms, methodologies and the identity of the researcher of ‘religion’ in question. With regards to disciplinary location, it should be noted that the particular debates I have hereto sketched in this paragraph on the vexed relationship between religion and gender, and the marginalization of feminist and gender-critical research vis-à-vis the ‘mainstream’, concerns scholars situated in the discipline of ‘religious studies’.

Religious studies emerged in the nineteenth century, next to ‘history of religions’ and ‘comparative religions’ approaches with the aim of cultivating a scholarly approach to the study of religion as distinct from theology. Drawing on the phenomenological method of using empathy (and *époque*, bracketing one’s judgement) for understanding the viewpoint of the believer and describing the ‘religious phenomenon’ in its own terms, the discipline of religious studies also aimed to avoid the reductionist approach to ‘explaining away’ religion within the social sciences. Anthropologist Rosalind Shaw (1999: 104) has eloquently argued that ‘feminist projects may be caught up in contradictions arising from the histories of the disciplines in which change is sought’, and that the inability of the discipline of religious studies to be more gender-inclusive is precisely linked to its phenomenological heritage. Specifically, in religious studies, ‘religion’ is seen traditionally as irreducible or a *sui generis* category that must be understood ‘on its own terms’. Such a ‘view from above’ perspective of religious phenomena, so typical of the phenomenological approach, Shaw claims, results in a predilection for studying ‘religion as text’ and the conception of an abstract generic *homo religiosus*—who in fact is seen as exclusively male. Religious studies is very much dominated by a textual focus (analysing scripture, law, etc.) and (initially) also concerned those religious traditions which historically and institutionally have been dominated by men or certain male elites.

While it has been noted that the interpretative hermeneutics that characterizes religious studies, emphasizing empathy and the importance of religious subjectivity, might seem amenable to feminist epistemology and methodology (Hawthorne 2009), still the relation between the two remains awkward, Shaw (1999) claims. This is because the anti-reductionist idea of the irreducibility of religion needs to be understood within the ‘politics of disciplinary identity’, with religious studies at risk of being demoted to other disciplines and departments, or otherwise fused with the confessional study of religion, theology, unless it can maintain its distinctiveness. Furthermore, Shaw (1999) argues, the way in which the ‘distinctively religious’ in religious studies is conceived of as socially decontextualized is problematic. The voice and experience of the male believer is often taken as the normative,
and the way in which religion is gendered is masked. Questions of politics, power and inequality, including questions of gender relations, are at best seen as secondary or peripheral issues to the study of religion and not in and of themselves constitutive of religion. Religious studies, thus, has remained ‘effectively insulated’ from questions about standpoint, privilege and power, which by contrast are part and parcel of what feminist and gender scholarship is about.

Hence, in its effort to distinguish itself as the ‘scientific’ impartial and objective study of religion from the confessional discipline of theology, religious studies renders itself problematic for the pioneering feminist work on religion that developed under the umbrella of ‘feminist religious studies and theology’ (King and Beattie 2005; Christ 1992; King 2015). For as Tina Beattie (2005, 67) notes, and to which I will return later in this chapter, the privileging of objectivity and detachment ‘negates some of the fundamental insights of feminist research methodologies’, which often results in a conflation, or fusing, of feminist religious studies with feminist theology in genealogies of the study of religion and gender today. Hence, feminism and gender stand in a vexed relationship to religion in the field of religious studies, not only due to the specificity of the subject matter—on the whole, historically many religions have been men- and male-centred or -dominated—but also because of the formation of the discipline in its claims to objectivity and scientific autonomy.

Doing religion and gender: the social sciences

Beyond the boundaries of ‘religious studies’ and its specific history of identity formation as a discipline poised between theology and the (social) sciences, the study of religion and gender has, and is increasingly, taking place within many other disciplines. In the humanities, religion and gender have to varying degrees been the subject of research or specialization in fields such as history (Bynum, Harrell, and Richman 1986; Mack 2003; Ahmed 1992; Badran 2013) and literary and narrative analysis (Llewellyn 2015; Delgadillo 2011). In the social and behavioural sciences, there are specialized subfields, such as the anthropology of religion and the sociology of religion. Examples of gender and religion research in the social sciences are numerous, such as in law (Joffe and Neil 2013; Failinger, Schiltz, and Stabile 2013), geography (Fenster 2004; Morin and Kay Guelke 2007), education (Gross, Davies, and Diab 2012), media (Lövheim 2013; Messina-Dysert and Ruether 2015), migration (Bonifacio and Angeles 2010; Ryan and Vacchelli 2013) and development studies (Bradley 2006; Tomalin 2011). Religion and gender has also gained attention in notable ‘secular’ domains such as political sciences, citizenship studies (Herzog and Braude 2009; Bayes and Tohidi 2001; Braidotti et al. 2014; Nyhagen and Halsaa 2016; Reilly and Scriver 2014) and international relations (Donahoe 2014). Yet much work from a social science perspective also starts from the antagonistic relationship between religion and gender and sexual equality, underpinned by the assumption that religion is irredeemably problematic for women. It is also my impression that many assessments of the status of ‘religion and gender’—albeit logically and understandably—usually take place with regards to the disciplinary orientation of the study in question, yet are often inconversant with related issues and advances made in other disciplines. For example, it is in this sense that a recent introduction to a special issue of the sociological journal Gender and Society on ‘religion’ seems to echo many of the claims made by feminist religious studies scholars two decades earlier when referring to the parochialization and marginalization of gender in the study of religion, and simultaneously, the negligence of the study of religion by sociologists of gender, despite what the editors call the salience of gender and religion as ‘mutually constitutive, social categories’ (Avishai, Jafar, and Rinaldo 2015, 5).
Opposed to the socially decontextualized *sui generis* understanding of religion in religious studies, one might expect that the social sciences would provide a more hospitable environment for research on religion and gender. Yet feminist scholars have similarly critiqued dominant theoretical frameworks in the sociology of religion for not attending to gender issues (Ruspini, Bonifacio, and Corradi 2018; Woodhead 2001; Neitz 2014). Based on an analysis of contributions in North American journals in the sociology of religion and the sociology of gender, for example, Avishai and Iry (2017: 647) conclude that over the past three decades there is ‘partial integration yet continued marginalization’. While social studies of religion and gender have increased and expanded in scope, and gender as a topic has become more prevalent, research on religion that utilizes more explicit gender-critical and feminist theoretical frameworks remains insulated, they claim, not only from mainstream sociology, but also within the sociology of gender. Again, the politics of disciplinary identity undoubtedly play a role; the study of religion occupied a marginal and sometimes isolated position as a subfield within sociology, due to the longstanding dominance of the secularization paradigm. The gender dimension of the secularization and potential re-sacralization process has also more recently been foregrounded by feminist sociologists, and although geographical contexts diverge considerably as do the explanatory frameworks that are offered, attention has duly been brought to the fact that on the whole, women in Western societies continue to appear to be more religious, or in any case, to date less secular(ized) than men (Neitz 2014; Woodhead 2008; Vaccott, Sharma, and Aune 2008; Trzebciatowska and Bruce 2012).

As Avishai and Iry (2017) note, although there appears to be somewhat of a disconnect between different generations of sociological research on religion and gender, empirical studies have expanded with foci that range from—again giving just some examples—women’s participation in alternative spiritualities and new religious movements (Rountree 2004; Salomonsen 2002; Puttick 1997; Fedele and Knibbe 2013) to women’s status and activism in established religious traditions and institutions (Gervais 2018; Kupari and Vuola 2019), to their practices, agency and subjectivity in more conservative, traditionalist religious movements and communities among both majority and minority religions and populations (Bacchetta and Power 2002; Dubbel and Vintges 2007). Diversity, intersectional, postcolonial and decolonial thought, together with the development of men’s studies and LGBTQI+ theories and activism, have expanded the scope of what might come under religion and ‘gender’ research as an umbrella term. Studies range from the explosion of interest in gender and Islam (both among Muslim minorities and Muslim majority populations) (Mahmood 2005; Ahmed-Ghosh 2015) to religious traditions other than the Abrahamic religions, including smaller traditions that are also increasingly represented in empirical religion and gender research (Marcos 2010; Ram 2013; Sered 1999). LGBTQI+ communities, movements and expressions of religiosity are increasingly the subject of empirical gender and religion research throughout the world (Wilcox 2018; Van Klinken 2016; Browne, Munt, and Yip 2016). Next to longer-established pioneering journals such as the *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion, Feminist Theology* and the *Journal of the European Society of Women in Theological Research*, new fora have been launched such as the European-based journal *Religion and Gender* which reflect the desire to move beyond ‘women’ and ‘feminism’ and broaden the scope of religion and gender to be inclusive of ‘queer, intersectional, postcolonial and post-secular perspectives’ (Korte 2011). The *African Journal of Gender and Religion* is similarly oriented to the study of gender and power in feminist, queer and masculinity studies with a focus on the African context. Hence, a novelty to initiatives such as these is that they aspire to be truly interdisciplinary, moving beyond the confines of either a ‘subfield’ of religion within a social science or humanities discipline or the ‘religion’ disciplines of religious studies and theology.
The feminism conundrum

The sudden interest in, or what is sometimes referred to as the ‘discovery’ of, religion in sociology, exemplified in renewed attention for notions such as ‘lived religion’, ‘everyday religion’, ‘popular religion’, and ‘doing religion’, beyond secularization, also resonates with the way religion is analysed in the more practice-oriented discipline of anthropology. Early ethnographies of religion and gender range from gender analyses of spirit possession in the Zar cult in Northern Sudan (Boddy 1989), gendered cosmologies among rural Sunni Muslims in Turkey (Delaney 1991), gender and power in Greek Orthodox pilgrimages (Dubisch 1995) and Haitian Voodoo healing in Brooklyn (Brown and Michel 2011) to Ryukyuan priestesses on the Japanese island of Okinawa (Sered 1999), to name but a few. Yet again, we might characterize such work as insulated not only from its own mainstream, but also from the sociology of religion and gender, reflecting its traditional—yet now largely moot—division of labour between the study of the ‘modernized West’ versus ‘non-Western culture’ and ‘Global South’. Ethnographies of religion and gender have similarly not gained much attention within the larger field of women’s, gender and feminist studies (see also Gemzöe and Keinänen 2016) until the monumental work by anthropologist Saba Mahmood (2005) on Muslim women’s religious lives in Cairo, to which I shortly turn.

In sum, gender and feminist scholars working within the field of religious studies, theology and the social sciences have often been ‘quarantined’ within their mainstream disciplines. Yet they have also quite regrettably often been insulated from each other’s work where fruitful connections might have otherwise been made. Due to the contentious relationship between feminism and religion, however, this negligence has also, and especially, taken place within feminist theory and women’s, gender and feminist studies as a—purportedly—interdisciplinary field (Longman 2003; Vuola 2016; Llewellyn and Trzebiatowska 2013).

The post-secular turn in feminist theory

What is often referred to as the ‘post-secular turn in feminist theory’ (Braidotti 2008) epitomizes a shift in the field of women’s, gender and feminist studies as an interdisciplinary field. Over the past decade, there has emerged a trend in challenging secular-oriented feminist theory, towards taking the relationship between gender and religion seriously, in a more nuanced and complex way beyond a relation of antithesis and incompatibility between feminism and religion. This shift has accompanied debate on the notion of ‘agency’ that has been delinked from the ‘logics of subversion and resistance’ (Mahmood 2005; Nyhagen and Halsaa 2016). ‘Agency’ has become a primary lens through which religion has garnered attention, is viewed and consequently is often analysed in the broader field of women’s, gender and feminist studies. Furthermore, interest in religion and gender often emerges with regards to what from the secular-liberal feminist point of view can be identified as ‘paradoxical’, namely gender-traditional, conservative, non-oppositional forms of religious piety and practice in male-dominated religious traditions, including, for example, agentic modalities of compliance and docility (Nyhagen and Halsaa 2016; Mahmood 2005; Burke 2012).

As noted, the publication of Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject by the late Saba Mahmood (2005), drawing on an ethnography of Muslim women’s piety in Cairo’s mosque movement, has played an important role as a catalyst for sudden interest and more acceptance for the study of religion within women’s, gender and feminist studies. In her book, Mahmood 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. Mahmood takes to task liberal ideas on autonomy, freedom and choice, which in a classic anthropological vein she shows to be culturally specific. Yet
she also critiques more recent poststructuralist feminist accounts of agency and subjectivity. Although the latter may challenge the universal disembodied ‘transcendental’ subject of masculine rationality, Mahmood (2005: 14) finds, ‘the normative political subject of poststructuralist theory often remains a liberatory one, whose agency is conceptualized on the binary model of subordination and subversion.’

Although, as Gemzöe and Keinänen (2016, 8) point out, ‘understanding women’s religious agency outside a simple frame of oppressor-oppressed is not new in the field of gender and religion’, the ‘turn to religious agency’ more widely has had a twofold effect: (1) A broader recognition that despite many calls for taking postcolonial and intersectional differences and multiple forms of diversity into account, a dominant strand of feminist thought remained entrenched in a particular Western secular-liberal paradigm; leading to (2) the more normative question that religion might not necessarily be (exclusively) oppressive to women and gender minorities and, therefore, secularism—in its complex relationship to religion—might not necessarily be the linear, singular and definitive pathway to achieve gender equality and sexual liberty for all (Butler 2008; Scott 2009; Cady and Fessenden 2013). What is sometimes referred to as a ‘post-secular’ perspective on religion and society interrogates the seeming coexistence of ongoing secularization and religious revival by unpacking the way the dominant secular narrative in the first place ‘frames’ religion as its opposite. Feminist theorists rethinking the relationship between religion and the secular in relation to women’s rights have additionally emphasized the way the dominant secular narrative is also framed by gendered binaries, such as faith vs. reason, private vs. public, subjection vs. freedom, colonizer vs. colonized, self vs. other and male vs. female (Graham 2012; Jakobsen and Pellegrini 2008; Greed 2011; Korte 2011; van den Brandt 2019; Hawthorne 2014).

Despite these promising and quite exciting developments for feminist scholars of religion and gender today, I contend that the post-secular turn towards acknowledging the ‘feminist potential’ of religion within secular feminist theory and the broader field of women’s, gender and feminist studies remains as of yet somewhat selective and therefore partial. For example, feminist philosopher Rosi Braidotti (2008: 7), in an article in which she coins the notion of the ‘post-secular turn in feminism’, locates the ‘non-secular’ and what she refers to as ‘other’ feminist traditions in the writings of some feminist theologians and in ‘various schools of feminist spirituality and alternative spiritual practices’. In her understanding of these ‘schools’, she attributes a spiritual dimension to the work of some writers in black feminism and postcolonial and critical theory and to neo-vitalist and neo-holistic thought. However, as Nyhagen and Halsaa (2016, 46–47) remark, in this brief listing, so much work in the feminist study of religion is overlooked. This includes historical and contemporary activism and scholarship by Christian, Muslim and Jewish religious feminists in both national and international contexts, as well as the traditions of work on gender and religion such as referred to and discussed in previous paragraphs. The so-called post-secular turn in feminism therefore somewhat disavows and re-marginalizes this legacy, and as Nyhagen and Halsaa posit, reframes ‘secular feminists as the hegemonic norm and religious or spiritual feminists as the exception’ (ibid., 47). Braidotti’s ‘secular’ call to explore the agentic and affirmative potential of religion and acknowledge the spiritual potential in feminist traditions otherwise not seen as ‘religious’ is nevertheless refreshing. It resonates with some interest and curiosity from what are otherwise known as more ‘secular’-oriented feminist theorists in the social sciences and humanities (Cornell and Seely 2016; Scott 2017).

Religion is also slowly, but still rarely, included as an ‘marker’ of difference in intersectional theory (Hawthorne 2014; Singh 2015). Finally, there is also a selective tendency to locate religious agency in the ‘other’ (migrant, minority, traditionalist) to the Western secular (and often post-Christian) self. Sian Hawthorne (2014) situates the emergence of the antagonistic
relationship between feminism and religion against the historical background of an entanglement between colonialism and secularism in Western modernity. She argues that an ‘ethnocentric’ understanding of religion—emerging from the colonial imposition of a Christian model of religion—informs and sustains Western feminists’ self-understanding as emancipated, vis-à-vis religion as a site of oppression among ‘Others’. Parallel to this form of ‘religious othering’ is a more anthropological or cultural relativist strand (partly echoed in Mahmood’s work), as earlier formulated by Leela Fernandes (2003, 9): ‘At best, feminist theorists and organizations tend to relegate spirituality to the local “cultural” idioms of grassroots women (usually in “other” places and “other” women), acknowledging it in the name of an uneasy cultural relativist tendency of “respecting cultural difference.”’ Both strands, I think, continue to coexist and show continuity in the displacement of ‘religion’ (from ‘oppression’ to ‘agency’) onto the other in affirmation of the—imagined—feminist secular self. What was envisioned as a truly interdisciplinary field still tends to remain selectively open to religion, due to the vexed relation between religion and feminism which remains unresolved.

**Between advocacy and impartiality: feminist studies in religion or feminist studies of religion?**

The disconnections between disciplines, and the related disaccord between secular and religious feminists sketched earlier, can perhaps be more fruitfully linked to a discussion on what positionality and engagement might involve when studying religion and gender from a feminist perspective. While the notion of ‘gender’ might have carried an aura of neutrality and objectivity in view of potential integration and acceptance within mainstream disciplines, as Avishai and Irby (2017) in their aforementioned journal analysis also claim, this has come with a price; it might have been at the expense of more ‘feminist’ analyses that both reveal and critique gender and religion in their hierarchical interrelations.

As explained in the beginning of this chapter, the engendering of religious studies has been particularly problematic due to its institutional identity formation as a disengaged, objective—albeit interpretative—field of research, in counter position to the confessional ‘engaged’ and normative perspective that characterizes the discipline of theology. What does this entail for the feminist approach to the study of religion and gender? In what ways can it be conceived of as either engaged or disengaged scholarship? Some scholars in religious studies argue that a strict distinction should be maintained between, on the one hand, feminist research and analysis of religion (under the umbrella of women’s studies or gender studies of religion) and, on the other hand, active feminist ‘reconstructions’ of religions themselves. Hence, certain approaches by feminist scholars in religious studies have been critiqued for conflating the feminist study of religion with ‘advocacy’ for change in the religion under study, which should be viewed as a practice internal to religion, rather than that its study as a proper object of research. The work of the aforementioned feminist scholar of Buddhism (and self-proclaimed Buddhist feminist) Rita Gross has particularly been taken to task for this type of conflation, for the way she studies, reinterprets and reimagines Buddhism from a feminist perspective. Hewitt (1999, 47), for example, maintains that in doing so she is ‘run[ning] into danger of converting ideology critique into a new ideology when reconceiving religious traditions’. Historian of religion Young (1999, 168) similarly sees King’s approach as a non-scholarly attempt to ‘transform an academic discipline into a secular worldview in the guise of a religion and thus to transform the university classroom into a mission field’. By reimagining ‘religion’ from a feminist point of view, critics argue one is not practising value neutrality and descriptive scholarly analysis but becomes the advocate of a ‘new’ invented tradition. Hawthorne (2009) and Salgado (2013) have poignantly drawn
attention to the orientalist and colonial character of such scholarship/advocacy that judges, imports and projects Western notions of ‘religion’ and ideologies of liberalism and humanism (including feminism) onto ‘others’. However, regardless of the tradition or location under study, such criticism still does not resolve the question of positionality in feminist studies of/in religion, and whether the enemy is just bad—imperialist—scholarship and/or bad—patriarchal non-feminist—religion.

The crux of the issue is that the feminist critique of the notion of objectivity and value neutrality also undermines the fundamental phenomenological/confessional division on which religious studies is based. Feminist religious studies scholars have been at the forefront of challenging the objectivist understanding of the study of religion and eradicating the so-called divide between the ‘insider’ versus the ‘outsider’ point of view. Fiona Bowie (1998, 43), for example, claims that feminist scholars in particular ‘pose a profound challenge to the rhetoric both of objectivity (in religious studies) and of accepted revelation (in theology)’. For the ‘secular’ (or agnostic) feminist scholar, feminist advocacy and normative ‘insider’ approaches to the study of religion might cause a sense of uneasiness and confusion. Such approaches might even undergird some of the negligence and marginalization of religious studies and theology by other gender studies scholars, as the question can be raised to what extent it might be possible to claim an engaged (feminist) position, yet one that might be ‘outside’ to the religion under study. Should a feminist approach to the study of religion entail critiquing androcentric scholarship by attending to women’s religious agency and subjectivity? Or should the feminist scholar go beyond ‘detached’ descriptive analysis and actively engage in the deconstruction of patriarchal religion from within and the creation of something new? As Saba Mahmood (2005, 10) has stated regarding her ethnographic study of religious-compliant women, feminism entails both ‘a diagnosis of women’s status across cultures and a prescription for changing the situation of women who are understood to be marginalized, subordinated or oppressed’. Feminist scholarship thus carries inherent tensions being both ‘analytically and politically prescriptive’. Yet this normative predicament is not on par with the dissolution of self/other boundaries proposed by some feminist religious studies scholars and theologians.

Theologian and development and gender studies scholar Elina Vuola (2016) brings an interesting view on the way disconnections between secular and religious feminist approaches can be bridged by taking each other’s work and positions more seriously. She laments the ‘avoidance’ of theology within the study of religion and gender and the way insights from feminist theology are seldom included in ‘secular’ gender studies. She also acknowledges how the insider/outsider or normative/descriptive division of labour between theology and religious studies plays out in complex ways for the feminist scholar. Nevertheless, Vuola argues, secular gender studies and the study of religion and gender might benefit greatly from engaging with feminist theology, otherwise omitting its potential in terms of its ethical, practical and political dimension and the theorizing it has generated. Feminist theology was ‘interreligious, ecumenical and global’ from its inception, Vuola (2016, 316) argues, with an early inclusion of what is today called intersectionality and engagement with liberation theology and feminist scholars of religion in the Global South. In the study of religion and gender, Vuola suggests to make an analytical distinction between the women who actively participate in religious traditions (often the subject in religious studies and social sciences), religious feminists themselves (women who work in their religious communities and traditions for reforms in gender relations, ethics and women’s authority), and a third group of feminist theologians, who are primarily theoretically oriented. Although these groups might overlap, the latter can be recognized as part of the academic study of religion and as a form of women’s religious agency in itself, seeing ‘the study of lived religion and the theological ideas that are related to it should not be too arbitrarily separated’ (ibid., 322).
Conclusion: solving the conundrum? Methodological cues

The once presumed incompatibility between religion and feminism is increasingly questioned, and the study of religion is no longer completely neglected or ignored within the broader field of gender, women’s and feminist research. However, several disconnections between secular and religious feminisms persevere. I contended that the so-called post-secular turn in feminist theory signals an emerging openness and curiosity for the feminist potential of religion and spirituality from the side of secular feminist scholarship, yet that it can be viewed as somewhat selective and partial. The notion of ‘agency’ beyond the logics of oppression and resistance has become an analytical lens for many empirical studies and theoretical debates in the study of religion, gender and society. Yet the result has remained somewhat selective in that there is a tendency to ‘outsource’ women’s religious or spiritual agency (in analogy with Inderpal Grewal’s (2013) notion of ‘outsourcing patriarchy’), to practices and communities regarded—and inadvertantly reproduced—as ‘other’ to the Western secular(ized) and feminist self (Longman 2018, 14).

Hence for a ‘decolonization’ of the feminist study of religion and gender to take place, this involves a more thorough de-secularization in which women’s, gender and feminist studies, as a purportedly interdisciplinary field, ceases to neglect and more self-reflexively starts to engage with a whole herstory of feminist religious thought, practice (or ‘lived religion’) and activism (‘here’ and ‘elsewhere’). It also requires engaging with gender and religion research across the full scope of the social sciences and humanities, including disciplines such as religious studies and theology. The study of the relationship between religion, gender and power can benefit from more exchange and dialogue between disciplines ranging from confessional, normative, religious-constructive or ‘religionist’ perspectives through to the more descriptive, critical and political perspectives. The development of more interdisciplinary initiatives and fora can provide a start where researchers, especially from younger generations, can exchange across niches and the boundaries of their own disciplines that are often set in teaching programmes, departments, journals and scientific associations.

Secondly, the feminist study of religion and gender would gain from more debate and discussion regarding researchers’ situatedness, positionality and accountability (Beattie 2005). Feminist epistemology and methodology complicate questions of analysis, engagement, advocacy and critique in the study of religion and gender. By virtue of its secular-liberal roots and its predicament of being both ‘analytically and politically prescriptive’, feminist scholarship carries inherent tensions that cannot, and perhaps need not, be easily solved. When studying religion and gender in particular, it makes a difference which discipline one is located in, in terms of scholarly paradigm, methodology and intersectional and personal positioning (e.g. insider or outsider, minority-majority, secular, agnostic or religious) and requires reflexivity regarding subjective positionings and normative assumptions, although such positions are seldom fixed or clear cut. Beyond the ‘God-trick’, feminist studies of religion and gender require that we explicitly problematize and continuously reflect on the location, positionality and subjectivities we inhabit, that are informed, and can always potentially be transformed, by our experiences and research.

References


The feminism conundrum


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