

Edited by  
Joanna de Groot  
and Sue Morgan



# Sex, Gender *and the Sacred*

Reconfiguring Religion in Gender History

WILEY Blackwell

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# Introduction: Beyond the 'Religious Turn'? Past, Present and Future Perspectives in Gender History

*Joanna de Groot and Sue Morgan*

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In the twenty-fifth anniversary year of *Gender & History*, this special issue on religion provides an opportune moment for the review and reassessment of an aspect of gender history that has developed a substantial scholarship and witnessed important historiographical shifts both before and since the 1980s. As a capacious heuristic category, 'religion' stands in for a range of meanings historically, from the highly individuated interior experience of prayer and mysticism to the public corporate structures of institutional or national religious politics. As the various contributors to this volume illustrate, religious discourses can be expressed through private contemplation, worship rituals, sacred works of art, spiritual communities, associational networks and nationalist agendas. They have been appropriated performatively by women and men in the past as part of both individual identity formations and socio-political practices. In what ways, then, might an analysis of religion help us rethink the current frameworks and narratives of histories of gender and, conversely, how might a focus on gender and sexuality illuminate the past interactions of religion and culture? These questions framed a stimulating two-day international symposium held in September 2012 at the University of York from which this volume developed, where speakers debated the tenacious and creative power of religion in fashioning gendered selves across a wide geographical, spiritual and chronological spectrum. Spanning almost 4,000 years from the second millennium BCE to the twenty-first century, the interlocking narratives of religion and gender were scrutinised from ancient Mesopotamia to renaissance Milan, from Song China to post-revolutionary Mexico, from medieval Ireland to modern Spain and Cuba, and from early modern England to nineteenth-century India.

Several major themes emerged from the symposium and are enlarged upon here: that we live in a world which is both increasingly secular and increasingly religious, and that within this paradox issues concerning gender and sexuality constitute repeated points of crisis and rupture; that in a field committed to exploring relations of difference through gender, age, ethnicity, class or sexual orientation, gender history has not always accorded religious differences a similar analytical force, subsuming them within national, ethnic or other cultural identities; following on from this point – 'theology

really matters'. As the exposition of a given faith's encounter with, and revelation of, the divine (an essentially metaphysical experience), theology has often been collapsed by historians into its wider social and more visible counterpart, religion. Yet as Dominic Erdozain warns, the omission of theology reduces religion to little more than a reflection or determinant of culture. In neglecting theological heterogeneity, the material impact of differing doctrines and beliefs upon the lives of men and women is obscured.<sup>1</sup> For gender historians, this loss is particularly significant in understanding how hegemonies are made and maintained. As feminist theologians have demonstrated, symbolic and anthropomorphic images of the divine are saturated with gender constructs, often with important, if inconsistent implications for the temporal gender order. Patriarchy may have been well served, although sometimes subverted, by the Christian symbols of God the Father and Son, Eve and the Virgin Mary, but what were the lived gender effects of Hindu goddess cults such as that of Kali with its maternal and warrior-like representations of femininity, or Nahua deities of Central Mexico who transgressed gender binaries?<sup>2</sup>

Since its establishment, *Gender & History* has contributed regularly to the historiography of gender and religion through a wide range of articles. Among other subjects these have examined medieval convent spirituality, early modern Islamic conversion narratives, masculinity and priestly power in medieval Normandy and Florence, Jewish women in the Holocaust, Australian missionary masculinities and Aboriginal peoples, clerical marriage in the English and German reformations, diasporic West African spiritualities, Irish Catholic masculinity, Scottish missionaries and sexual misconduct, female Quaker ministries, and modern Italian and Argentinian Catholic women's organisations.<sup>3</sup> A significant increase in articles centred on religion in the nineties and 'noughties' reflects a more general 'religious turn' in cultural history. Our introduction focuses upon past, present and future perspectives on the history of gender and religion, identifying some of the major tropes, narratives and turning-points to date, situating the volume's contents within some currently important themes in gender history and suggesting future potentialities for this burgeoning field.

## Past perspectives

The earliest and most extensive historiographies of gender and religion over the last forty years have dealt with Christianity in its multiple forms. This literature, particularly in the anglophone world, has manifested interesting, albeit uneven developments shaped by diverse national contexts. In the USA, landmark articles such as Barbara Welter's 'The Cult of True Womanhood' (1966) and 'The Feminisation of American Religion, 1800–1860' (1974), led the way in identifying religion's formative contribution to one of the major organising tropes of women's history, 'separate spheres' ideology.<sup>4</sup> Since then, an enormous literature on American women and religion has been forthcoming which, as Catherine Brekus observes, 'virtually defies categorization'. Numerous studies of the beliefs and practices of enslaved women, African American holiness preachers, Catholic, Protestant, Mormon and Jewish men and women in addition to Native American forms of spirituality have been produced, despite a relative decline in interest during the 1980s due to the rise of the Religious Right and its ultra-conservative gender and sexual politics.<sup>5</sup> In Britain, the socialist-feminist focus of much early gender history often marginalised religion as of limited relevance for understanding women's economic and political disadvantages. Nonetheless, Barbara Taylor's work has acknowledged

the interaction of religious with other intellectual and political influences in the writings and activism of Owenite feminists and Mary Wollstonecraft.<sup>6</sup> As the early modern historian Patricia Crawford would later comment, the religious subject appeared unexciting – all too often 'the godly woman was the successfully socialised woman'.<sup>7</sup> However, in its iconic reading of the role of gender in the formation of the middle classes, Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall's *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780–1850* (1987) provided what remains one of the most nuanced readings of Victorian evangelicalism and its contradictory implications for hegemonic constructions of both femininity and masculinity.<sup>8</sup> It modelled an approach with rich possibilities for those working on gender and religion in other contexts.

One of the dominant narratives to emerge in modern scholarship recounts the 'feminisation of religion', a multivalent thesis originating in work on American Protestantism focused on women's greater preponderance in religious and church life and the increasing cultural designation of women as the more pious sex. Despite numerous studies of this phenomenon in Europe, North America and Australia, the theory has received increasing criticism as an overly simplistic formula that disregards both free-thinking, secularist and atheist women – many of whom, like the atheist and broadcaster Margaret Knight, attracted considerable vilification – and devout men (discussed later in this introduction).<sup>9</sup> The 'feminisation of religion' theory, it is argued, reinscribes gender binaries and essentialises the very categories that require historical interrogation. It is also quite religiously specific. In Judaism, for example, it was certainly the case that pioneering women such as Lily Montagu and Ray Frank engaged in quasi-theological forms of social and educational activities among their co-religionists, as shown by Jean Spence, Shari Rabin and Susan L. Tananbaum.<sup>10</sup> Nonetheless, Anne Summers has argued that the feminisation theory remains 'largely inapplicable' to modern western Jewish communities where, with women excluded from the rabbinate until the 1970s, religious practice remained overwhelmingly male and women's responsibility for Sabbath observance was a largely domestic affair. Benjamin Baader's work on nineteenth-century Judaism and bourgeois culture in Germany, however, suggests a more complex picture.<sup>11</sup>

A flourishing body of work on religion and women's historical agency, often using interpretative models such as 'women's culture' and 'female associational networks' in studies of family life, philanthropy, missionary activity, sisterhoods, preaching and social reform, suggests that the feminisation theory persists.<sup>12</sup> The extent to which female religious activism might be designated 'feminist' has also prompted long-standing and unresolved debate. Feminism could be nurtured by heterodox forms of spirituality such as theosophy, Christian Science or the Babi-Baha'i tradition, and by religious scepticism or secularism. Recent work on women and gender in the Buddhist, Jewish and Hindu traditions has similarly recuperated women's agency, opening up gendered analyses of beliefs, texts and practices, and exploring the issues of embodiment and sexuality which interest several authors in this special issue.<sup>13</sup> Work by Padma Anagol, Patricia Grimshaw, Rhonda Semple and others shows that religiously derived feminisms were often the product of complex transnational and local circulations of ideas, and of religiously syncretic interactions between colonial missionary and indigenous women's discourses. Transcultural and trans-spatial approaches to gender and religion, approaches which appear in some of the articles published here, have informed discussions of cross-confessional encounters in the Iberian peninsula as well as in

early modern colonial settings in the Americas.<sup>14</sup> Jacqueline de Vries has shown how suffragists often appropriated religious tropes, symbols and rituals, while others note that critical issues of liberal reform or civil rights often transcended religious differences while including faith-specific features.<sup>15</sup>

Nonetheless, theoretical analyses of the causal relationship between mainstream religious traditions and feminism seem inconclusive, with historians acknowledging religion's ability to mobilise women while simultaneously critiquing its tendency to delimit the radicalism of feminist ideas. As Immaculada Blasco Herranz has commented in her study of female Spanish Catholic militancy, such approaches reveal 'a form of cultural ascent towards both a feminist consciousness and women's emancipation' of an essentially secular kind.<sup>16</sup> The early modern historian Sarah Apetrei remains similarly unconvinced by readings of religion as a 'kind of implacable patriarchal intelligence' against which women engaged in various 'imaginative and intellectual gymnastics' seeking to circumvent its more oppressive traits. Religion, she reminds us, 'was not just the envelope for an unconsciously secular or self-serving agenda: it was the very origin and goal of feminism'.<sup>17</sup> In her studies of seventeenth-century female visionaries and eighteenth-century Methodist radicals, Phyllis Mack argues that self-transcendence rather than self-advancement was their core spiritual aim. Carmen Mangion has similarly shown that women entering convents and sisterhoods were less interested in challenging the status quo than in pursuing a 'higher calling'. Conceptualising authority in terms of humility, and agency in terms of 'lack' (lack of status, autonomy or even gender, as Mack famously phrases it) means that taking religion 'on its own terms' poses considerable conceptual challenges for feminist and gender historians.<sup>18</sup>

The recent global rise of new religious politics provides contemporary examples of women's support for so-called 'fundamentalist' movements with their frequently restrictive attitudes towards gender roles and sexuality. The instabilities created by environmental disasters, the failure of secular projects (whether nationalist, leftist or liberal), capitalism's global exploitation of the markets and labour, and the resulting poverty and destabilisation of family structures have provided opportunities for new forms of religiously inspired social and political action around faith-branded organisations. According to Martin Riesebrodt and Kelly H. Chong, this not only contends with other political forces at the level of state or community, but also acts as a means to access "higher powers" in order to prevent crises or cope with them when they have occurred'.<sup>19</sup> Nor do religious 'fundamentalisms' necessarily negate female agency or interests in the views of adherents. As with right-wing movements of the interwar years, religious nationalisms are regarded by many women as providing greater protection and self-respect for their established familial roles, whether in the USA, Latin America, India or the Middle East.<sup>20</sup> Numerous studies of modern refigurations of 'Islamic' female dress codes have established how, for women who wish to study or work outside the home, they can provide protection from communal, patriarchal or familial criticism, and access to a degree of personal autonomy.<sup>21</sup>

The mobilisation of Iranian women in the anti-Shah movement of the late 1970s produced complex contradictions and intersections between the use of control over women as a flagship policy of the post-1979 'Islamic' regime, the expansion of educational opportunity and public visibility for women, and both dissenting Muslim and liberal women's critiques of the official version of Islam. Arguably it is the strongly patriarchal family forms and communal investment in ideas of reputation and



respectability with their religious inflections which constrain women quite as much as regime policy, as is also the case in the different political and economic setting of Afghanistan.<sup>22</sup> In the USA, family and sexuality also became core terrains for religious conservatives from the mid-1980s, and, as in South Korea, female participation in Christian church life became a welcome and acceptable form of relief from the restrictions of the patriarchal family structure. The literal and symbolic roles of the female body and sexuality have been ubiquitous, notably the stance of the US Christian right on abortion and homosexuality (the latter paralleled among evangelical Christians in Africa and various Muslim and Hindu groups). Powerful configurations of gender, religion and body politics have sustained contemporary reaffirmations and refiguring of conventions of body covering, genital cutting, or widow burning.<sup>23</sup>

Hindu nationalism has involved female grassroots activism in India where Hindu women have mobilised against Muslim women.<sup>24</sup> Other religious nationalisms in South Asia and the Middle East are inseparable from their anti-colonial origins and opposition to 'contaminating' western influences. Gendered rhetorics of religio-cultural authenticity entwine with invocations of scriptural tradition, but also with appropriations of the discourses of modernity. Thus Muslim and Hindu as well as Christian faith groups affirm the authority of established texts and practices while simultaneously asserting their conformability with 'modern' ideals of equity, opportunity and progress. In Iran, reformist Muslim intellectuals such as Ali Shari'ati attempted to align patriarchal gender prescriptions with a world in which articulate women staked modern claims to be heard; just as in Egypt the Muslim Brothers recognised spaces for autonomous activity by Muslim sisters. In Egypt and Iran, learned and pious women re-read sacred texts and challenged male-led claims to define 'right' versions of Islam. As with early modern European religious controversies, contests over the authoritative interpretation of texts and the ownership of that activity were powerfully inflected by gender politics.<sup>25</sup>

Women's recurrent representation as distinctive repositories of piety in many belief systems has meant that histories of masculinity and religion have been slower to emerge, although medievalists have produced important work in this field.<sup>26</sup> As Yvonne Werner has noted, if religion was gendered female, then 'religion and modern masculinity . . . seemed incompatible'.<sup>27</sup> Much work remains to be done on religious masculinities, both lay and clerical, as well as on men's negotiations of the growing dissonances between secular and spiritual codes of manliness in modern times. Here, recourse to a rhetoric of paradox is tempting. Within the gendered power structures of institutional religion, men have exercised undeniable levels of power and privilege with adverse results for women's spiritual, social and professional equality. (Remarkably, women's struggle for religious leadership and the historicisation of various forms of reassertion by religious patriarchies remains an under-explored narrative within modern gender and religion.) Interestingly, confronted with dominant ideals of the competitive, promiscuous, rational and materialistic secular male subject within the wider culture, devout men have inhabited an increasingly precarious historical terrain. Nowhere has this cultural contradiction been more literally embodied than in the suspect, peripheral masculinity of the clergy or, as George Eliot described them, a third 'clerical' sex.<sup>28</sup> Anti-clericalist sentiment has emerged at various past moments of popular political agitation expressed in plebeian, liberal and anti-puritan critiques, often accompanied, as Hugh McLeod shows for nineteenth-century England, by masculinist anti-clerical rhetoric directed against flamboyant 'effeminate' Anglo- or Roman

Catholic priesthoods. Comparable Protestant rhetorics were deployed in Germany and the UK against gaudy, 'feminised' Jews, whether prominent individuals like Disraeli or more generally Jewish migrants, 'white slave traders' or entrepreneurs.<sup>29</sup>

The perception of religion as increasingly feminised, the churches' declining ability to appeal to men, and a resulting 'crisis model' of modern religious masculinity has attained the status of historiographical orthodoxy in the field. Scholars have shown that attempts to buttress a dwindling religiously oriented masculinity from the 1850s onwards by emphasising muscularity, militarism, sporting prowess or heroism were a global phenomenon. Studies of the unstable but dominant trope of 'muscular Christianity' have been undertaken in numerous national contexts including Sweden, France, Canada, Germany, Australia, Ireland, Belgium and Spain as well as the USA and UK, each illustrating various theological emphases and narratives of decline.<sup>30</sup> In addition the transnational expression of muscular Christianity through the central topos of sport shows how interconnections between colonial and metropolitan identities of religion and gender cannot be understood solely through unidirectional, imperialist notions of the effeminate Hindu or the aggressively martial Sikh.<sup>31</sup> Instead, indigenous appropriations and a 'new logic of postcolonial hybridity' meant that Indians living under British colonial rule, or recipients of missionary activity in Japan, successfully de-Christianised and transformed the 'muscular Christian' ethic within new nationally and religiously specific formations such as muscular Hinduism or Japanese Bushido.<sup>32</sup> Joseph Alter argues that the yoga renaissance led by men like Swami Vivekenanda, so central to muscular Hinduism in the late nineteenth century, represented a transcultural effort to reconceive relations between the body, morality and spirituality and thus requires a global rather than simplistically colonial analytical framework.<sup>33</sup> Modern Buddhism, regarded by some as eminently appealing to men due to its reputation for rationalism, intellectualism and practical self-help, was similarly spiritually and ethnically multi-directional between South Asia, China, Europe and America.<sup>34</sup>

Like muscular Christianity, muscular Judaism in central and western Europe and the USA also focused upon physical strength and moral virtue. Although a minority movement, Zionism 'constituted a significant means of displaying a new Jewish male type' counteracting anti-Semitic stereotypes of passive, weak, scholarly Jews through an actively heterosexual representation of Max Nordau's *muskeljudentum*.<sup>35</sup> For many migrant communities, the desire to minimise 'alienness' and encourage acculturation could result in conservative gender and sexual politics, as the work of Lara Marks, Rickie Burman and Paula Hyman illustrates.<sup>36</sup> Their studies of Jewish communities parallel work on migrant Hindus and Muslims. As a result, new formations of migrant and diasporic gender identities were under constant (re)construction, shot through with differing inter-generational tensions and theological positions.

Attention to religion can provide gender historians with new ideas about hegemonic male identities and their relationship with marginalised, subordinate and complicit masculinities. Historians of medieval Christianity have contributed significantly to this process, exploring the emergence of Christianised masculinities, their intersections with pre- and non-Christian meanings and performances of 'manliness', and their complex links to expressions of sexuality.<sup>37</sup> According to Erin Bell, early Quaker men preached nonviolence, propounding a masculinity which challenged dominant early modern codes of aggressive male competition and authority, yet still maintained traditional gender power structures within the Quaker community. The way in which religious communities sought to secure their own theological identities through cultural

differentiation while seeking wider social acceptance is similarly highlighted in Sara Patterson's discussion of Mormon masculinity in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America. Here the legally required shift to monogamy necessitated new models of Mormon manhood marked by the dominant cultural virtues of business, patriotism and good citizenship rather than by polygamy.<sup>38</sup>

Alex Shepard and Garthine Walker have observed that cultural historians' preference for synchronic readings of the multiple meanings of masculinity or femininity has tended to forestall diachronic analyses of gender's role as a catalyst for historical change.<sup>39</sup> Several articles in this special issue interrogate conventional readings of historical periods such as the Renaissance, or map longer-term shifts in legislative attitudes to, and textual representations of, specific religious traditions such as Hinduism, Buddhism and Confucianism. However, the analysis of the role of gender in generating new periodisations of religion in the past has barely begun. Recent revisionist debates in religious history concerning the periodisation of secularisation and its complex relationship with modernity have received extensive attention, with Christianity's 'cultural displacement' relocated as late as the 1960s, a decade identified by arch-revisionist Callum Brown as witnessing the 'death of Christian Britain'.<sup>40</sup> Most significantly, gender rather than class-based analysis is given a crucial role in this shift. 'Gender', Brown asserts, 'is emerging as possibly the single most important definer of the timing and content of long-term change to the Christian religion of Europe'.<sup>41</sup> It is interesting to compare the emergence of 'postsecular' perspectives (discussed later) which take interactive rather than oppositional views of secular and Christian thought and practice, with the historiography of Islam and gender which still struggles to move away from working within that binary.

### Present perspectives

In the chapters which follow, the 'cultural historical' approach to the past is heavily, but not exclusively, in evidence, as authors explore the ambiguous discursive effects of religious behaviour and theological ideas on notions of gender and sexuality and the material contexts in which they were produced, normalised and resisted. Most contributors present religion as a prism through which men and women, individually and collectively, experienced a range of political, theological, social and sexual encounters. 'Difference' is writ large in this, as in all gender history; what it means to be religious cannot be understood without reference to issues of gender, age, class, race, ethnicity or sexual orientation. Nor is religiosity itself a fixed state. Several chapters make clear that one is never 'merely' Hindu, Muslim or Buddhist, just as one is never merely male or female, black or white. Instead, authors illustrate that not only are religious identities constantly inflected by other categories of difference but also that they are configured through both peaceful means and violent warfare. The following discussions revolve around four important current trajectories in the history of gender and religion around which we have structured the volume: transcultural exchanges, the body, sexuality and political aspects of religion.

### Crossing cultures, and transcultural exchanges

Cultural syncretism, pluralism and spatial mobility are at the core of the history of many religions, and thus transcultural approaches to that history are crucially relevant to