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Gender and Religion

by Birgit Heller

I

“Patriarchal religions”, a common trait of the world religions

«Attention to gender in the study of religion signals an important turning point which indicates a promising new direction for Religious Studies». With this remark, Ursula King, Head of the Department for Religious Studies in Bristol, concludes her essay on religion and gender, published in a volume about recent developments in the Study of Religion, *Turning Points in Religious Studies* (1990). Starting point of the forthcoming gender studies in religion is the fact that the existing traditional religious thoughts, concepts, symbols, teachings, rituals, institutions etc. as well as the scholarship about them, are set in a patriarchal and androcentric framework. The term patriarchy refers primarily to the social structures, to the patrilinear family extending to the male-dominated social and religious institutions. In the course of their history the great world religions, by and large, have legitimated the male-dominated social structure. Therefore the existing world religions are called patriarchal religions. Of course there are differences between the religions regarding the degree, the forms and the structures of argumentation which legitimate or reinforce the male dominance in society.

The American researcher Katherine Young¹ has used a scale to classify the world religions between the poles of male dominance and female power. Young considers the originally ethnic religions Hinduism, Confucianism and Judaism as one group recognising male dominance. The important role of the mother being central to the preservation of ethnic identity lead to a strong religiously legitimated control of women (for example high value of virginity, capital punishment for women in the case of adultery). Strict male control over women at each stage of life by father, husband, and then son ensured the purity of the bloodline. The reli-

1. Young, 1987, pp. 16 ff.

gious significance of women was based on their role as mothers to provide continuity. Most of all women were to be mothers of sons. Hinduism, Confucianism and Judaism identify woman and the home.

Islam, Christianity and Buddhism are defined as universal religions. Universal religions stressed soteriological equality and placed emphasis on personal experience. They have in common that women were active in the formative periods. Women played leading roles or were closely associated with the work of the Buddha, Jesus or Muhammad. The family had secondary importance compared to the new arising group. After these formative periods they were relegated to the background and pushed back to subordinated roles. Despite various reforms relating to women and the prominent position of the Prophet's wives, Islam came to insist on a clear separation of the roles of men and women. Islam has similarities to the ethnic religions restricting women to the home, to marriage and motherhood. Early Christianity continued some support of equality by allowing the monastic option for women. But male papacy, male priesthood and male control over the nuns became expressions of male dominance. Despite her soteriological equality woman was declared to be weaker in her biological and psychological nature and inferior in reason. Christian theologians reaffirmed the equality of both sexes in God but legitimated the male dominance in the social structure. Protestantism and Buddhism hold the middle position in Young's scale. Whereas the main streams of Protestantism are characterised by male dominance there are many examples of women in leading positions in protestant denominations. Buddhist traditions are marked by fundamentally egalitarian teachings and recorded attempts to prove that women are inferior to men were not successful. Nevertheless Buddhism has male-dominated structures.

Tantra and Taoism are similar with regard to the importance of feminine symbolism. Moreover women have access to positions of religious authority. Therefore these traditions are ranked nearest the pole of female power, despite the unresolved question of female instrumentalisation for male liberation or the missing social translation of religious gender equality.

Young's classification represents a simplified approach to determine the status of women in world religions which has to be refined and corrected. For example there is no differentiation between early Judaism and rabbinic Judaism or between Vedic Hinduism and brahmanical Hinduism. It is evident, Young's scale expresses the traditional positions. Recent developments and changes are not taken into consideration. For example Reform Judaism and modern Hinduism call in question the male dominance. They have developed a tendency towards fe-

male power at least in the field of religion. Up to now it is not possible to predict if these attempts to change the status and roles of women in world religions will be successful in the long run.

2

Basic elements of gender studies in religion

2.1. The gender analysis of religions

The invisibility or, at least, marginality of women in the contemporary world religions is a striking phenomenon. Though the phenomenon as such is not new, its perception on a broader level is quite new. It is only a slowly expanding insight that just those religious traditions, concepts, symbols and practices, which claim to be of universal significance are in reality gender-specific. The modern historical context marked by the striving for democracy, equality and liberality which paved the way for the women's movements and opened the possibility for new perspectives. Gender differences in world religions implying the discrimination, marginalisation or subordination of women become evident by putting questions like these: Why is God in Judaism and Christianity addressed or presented as man? Why are women in brahmanical Hinduism not allowed to study the holy scriptures? Why, according to the Koran, do rank men above women? Why is even the most advanced Buddhist nun subordinated to the lowest monk and why in the paradise of the Amida-Buddha do only males exist?

It is only recently that gender has become an important category in the production of knowledge. Whereas sex refers to the biologically given differences between women and men, gender points to the historically and culturally constructed understanding of what it means to be a man or a woman. Gender indicates how sexual differences are interpreted in terms of images, roles and relationships, an interpretation which can differ widely in different cultures and religions. The relationship between sex and gender is under discussion. It seems that the fruitless quarrel between biology and culture cannot be solved by reducing the complex cultural processes to a narrow biological fundament. Anyhow, the strict distinction between biology and culture does not satisfy. Gender could be understood as a socio-biological category, expressing the interaction between sexual differences and socio-cultural perceptions and determinations. The discussions about the portion of nature or of culture respectively seem to me of secondary importance.

In the past male scholars sometimes paid attention to gender differences by enquiring into the image and role of women in different reli-

gions. For example the German researcher Friedrich Heiler lectured about women. In 1977 his lectures were posthumously published. Much earlier the Indologists Moriz Winternitz and Johann Jakob Meyer wrote about the position of women in Indian religions. These rare works present rich descriptive material but they do not critically analyse the framework and assumptions about women inherent in different religions. A turning point in the Study of Religion occurred with the impact of critical feminist theory since the 1970s in the USA and about 10 years later in Europe and other parts of the world like Australia, Japan, North Africa or India.

In principle the attention to gender analysis relates to data about women as well as men, but given the overwhelmingly male oriented framework of all knowledge, in practice the attention to religion and gender is at present primarily directed towards women. Therefore most of the gender studies are as a matter of fact primarily women studies. Nevertheless it has to be noticed that many questions concerning women studies comprise the relationship between women and men. For example typical traits of women's spirituality can only be discerned by comparison with the characteristics of men's spirituality.

Gender and religion are interrelated in a twofold mode at least. ● On the one side religious traditions, concepts, symbols and practices are gender-specific determined. On the other side gender roles, power relations and the self-understanding of women and men have essential roots in the religious inheritance of a culture. Gender roles are formed by the socialization process into a given culture. Religious beliefs and values building a part of society and culture influence the individual formation of the gender stereotypes and the gender ideology².

2.2. Deconstruction of false universalism

In the year 1967 Rita Gross, a young student of the History of Religions, decided to write a paper on the role of women in Australian religions³. She found it difficult to write that paper as data were almost impossible to find. But all scholars told her that in these religions women are regarded as impure and profane and that they had no significant religious life at all. Nevertheless, she noticed that the actual data of Australian religions recounted myths in which women originally held power and taught men all the religious rituals. The data included also rituals in which men imitated female physiological processes like menstruation

2. See Helve, 1995.

3. Cfr. Gross, 1994, p. 327f.

and birth. Rita Gross concluded that the conventional scholarly hypotheses concerning these data were somehow inadequate. Women seemed to be evaluated as sacred, though in a manner different from men. When Mircea Eliade, for whom she had written that paper, returned it to her he strongly urged her to continue these explorations into a doctoral dissertation. He argued that she saw things in these materials that he, as a man, would probably not see. Her immediate response was: "No, I want to do my dissertation on something important". Rita Gross ended up, however, deciding to continue studying women and religion in her doctoral dissertation. She has become one of the pioneers in the field of Women Studies in Religion.

In her doctoral dissertation Rita Gross asked the undue question why women and religion had not been studied very much or very well previously. This question led her to methodological reflections and finally ended in the critique of the prevailing androcentrism in the Study of Religions. Her definition of androcentrism dating from the year 1977 is still valid and elucidatory:

1. First of all, in androcentric thinking, the male norm and the human norm are collapsed and become identical.
2. Secondly, because the male norm and the human norm are collapsed, it is assumed that the generic masculine habit of thought, language and research, is adequate, because women are included (for example Hindu ethics).
3. Third, and most important, when women, *per se*, are considered, after it becomes obvious that there is a differentiation of gender roles in every society and that therefore women are not adequately discussed in the generic masculine «they are discussed as an *object* exterior to mankind, needing to be explained and fitted into one's worldview, having the same ontological and epistemological status as trees, unicorns, deities or any other object that must be discussed to make experience intelligible. They are there in the world, but they are discussed as the 'other' to the human Subject attempting to understand his world...»⁴. Whereas men are presented as religious subjects, women predominantly appear in their roles as wives, mothers, sisters, daughters and so on.

As a consequence of the above statements one of the primary constructs of the history of religions, the *homo religiosus*, really turns out to be *vir religiosus*. To understand human religiosity according to Rita Gross an androgynous model of humanity is needed. By the term androgynous she simply means a "two-sex" model of humanity. Information about and understanding of both sexes must be a part of the analysis

4. Gross, 1977, p. 9 f.

and interpretation of any specific religious situation. The research on the *homo religiosus* has to deal with the *vir religiosus* and the *femina religiosa* alike.

In the last twenty years gender studies in religion have begun to uncover the androcentrism of religious traditions and the androcentrism of the Study of Religions as well. In the Study of Religions androcentrism affects the formulation of questions, the collection and representation of data, the analysis and interpretation of the collected data and the theories of religion. I use the research work of the above mentioned Mircea Eliade as an example to understand why the androcentric scholarly tradition cannot provide an accurate picture of the history of religions or the different elements of religious traditions. The belief that religion originated in the primordial hunt can be determined as an androcentric assumption underlying the work of Eliade. In his discussion of *Paleolithic and Neolithic religions* as a part of his monumental work *A History of Religious Ideas*, Eliade admits that in the Neolithic women and feminine symbolism are raised to the first rank, but he fails to develop a unified picture of Neolithic religion comparable to the vision of the Paleolithic religion. This can be attributed to his inability to fit a religion centred around female imagery into his overall picture of religion as a primarily male affair, a recapitulation and transformation of the religious ideas of the Paleolithic hunters⁵.

2.3. A paradigm shift in the study of religions

The great variety of questions posed and pursued in gender studies in religion arises on the one hand out of curiosity about women's lives and ways of knowing, women's insights and aspirations. On the other hand gender studies also emerge from a sensitivity to and criticism of the androcentric manner in which many religions have been shaped and formulated and also the androcentric manner in which religions generally have been studied⁶.

Anyhow, scholars interested in gender analysis are not working simply to replace male-centred lenses with female-focused lenses. Gender studies aim at the expansion or alternative or corrective to the historically prevalent male-based lenses. But to correct this imbalance is not a matter of adding the study of women as yet another theme to the Study of Religions. It is not enough simply to add a chapter on women in treatises

5. See Christ, 1991, spec. p. 93.

6. O'Connor, 1995, pp. 45 f.

or lectures about specific religious traditions or in comprehensive handbooks for the Study of Religions.

On the contrary, looking at women in different world religions requires a "new perspective" and raises new questions which affect the whole of the Study of Religions. The research on women and religion has to be integrated into the overall framework of research on religions. Every question has to be posed from the perspective and involvement of both sexes. It is no longer a matter of choice using the category of gender in research work or not. Gender studies imply a paradigm shift in the field of the study of religions. By using a gender-alert hermeneutic, research offers the promise of a more complete, less distorted, less partial knowledge.

3

Basic topics in the study of gender and religion

The variety of questions and topics in the context of gender and religion can be assigned to three main fields of research.

1. There is first the question of what are *women's status and roles* in different religious traditions. It has been shown that in general women hold higher positions in archaic, tribal and non-institutionalised religions than in highly differentiated and institutionalised religious traditions which have evolved hierarchical organizations. Also during the formative period of a religion women often play a leading role or are closely connected with the work of the founder whilst later they are relegated to the background. This is for example the case of the women associated with Jesus, Buddha or Muhammad. A gendered analysis of new religious movements could explore the roles of women and the connection between gender and power. This approach may lead to a classification distinguishing between movements which reaffirm the traditional roles for women, movements which offer leadership roles for women and entirely female-centred movements⁷.

2. A second interesting and important perspective concerns the subject of *cultural images, ideals, stereotypes and norms* about women. How are women presented in religious language and thought? Which images of women are projected in the different sacred scriptures? There is rich material available which gives information about how women are supposed to behave and what they should think about those required behaviours. It is evident that research in this field focuses on the thinking of men about women which should not be taken for the reality of female exist-

7. See Jacobs, 1991.

tence. A special topic to be mentioned in this context comprises the *feminine religious symbols and imagery*. Quite a lot of the recently published scientific and popular studies in religion deal with the various mythological and theological constructs of the "feminine", popularly known as "the goddess". The perhaps most interesting question of how symbolism of a divine feminine affects both women and men who affirm such images of the divine has not been researched in any significant way. The existence of feminine perceptions and embodiments of the Divine raises the difficult question of what is the relationship between the realm of the symbolic and real women in day-to-day life? Although there is no final answer at hand, from existing studies can be concluded that general statements are impossible. Goddess worship does not necessarily enhance the status of women, even in the contrary, Goddess worship sometimes goes along with the hostility against women. So did the arduous worship of the Holy Mother Mary not prevent the Dominican monk Heinrich Institoris from writing the «Hexenhammer» (*Malleus maleficarum*), which can be regarded as an expression of deep hatred against women. But it can also be stated that feminine religious symbols influence the development of female identity and can open roles of religious authority at least for some extraordinary women. According to the Hindu concept of women as manifestations of the Divine Mother women can partly participate in her divine power. For example Sarada Devi, the wife of Ramakrishna who is one of the most famous Indian mystics in the modern time, has already during lifetime been worshipped as Holy Mother, as revelation of the motherhood of God, as embodiment of all Goddesses. Sarada Devi (1853-1920) presents herself as the spiritual model of the nuns belonging to her order which was rather reluctantly founded by the monks of the Ramakrishna order in the 1950es. It must be stated, however, that in the ideology of the Ramakrishna Movement only the nuns can participate in the religious authority of the Divine Mother. All other women being imperfect manifestations of the Divine Mother are reduced to biological motherhood and to the traditional subordination of the orthodox Hindu wife⁸.

3. The most important issue is not what world religions teach about women. To recognise that women have a voice of their own and the determination and power to define themselves leads to the question what *women as religious subjects* do and think. What are women's actual religious lives, what are women's own religious experiences and how far has this been articulated in a way different from that of men? Has women's experience been integrated into the intellectual articulations of religious

8. See Heller, 1999.

doctrine? Women saints and mystics exercise much fascination on contemporary women, as these women provide strong role models in terms of female identity, autonomy and strength. So far, the many studies on religious experiences have hardly paid any attention to gender differences. The comparative study of male and female mystics is only in its infancy but raises some new questions. For example in her studies of medieval Christian mystics Caroline Bynum Walker found out that female mystics differ from male mystics in the way they understand their bodies or physiological processes as instruments for religious experiences. The spirituality of highly advanced tantric Buddhist women seems to be close to the needs of everyday-life. Famous female founding gurus of tantric Buddhism initiated the meditation for healing diseases, the ceremony of long life and the most popular practice of fasting in Tibet.

4

Concluding remarks

Dealing with religion means to deal with human beings and therefore to deal with *questions concerning gender*. Gender studies do not replace the traditional way of the Study of Religions which could be continued like before. It is evident that research distorted by androcentrism deserves the same critique as research influenced by eurocentrism or ethnocentrism. All claims about common humanness will be credible and trustworthy only if they are informed by attention to class, race and gender.

In 1977 Rita Gross deals with a frequent question of those who want the Study of Religions methodology to be adequate, but also wish to assert that the feminist critiques do not essentially apply to the discipline: «Yes, but even if the feminist critique has some validity, aren't these concerns peripheral and trivial compared to other issues like discerning an adequate model of religion or comprehending myth or understanding Buddhist philosophy?». And Rita Gross replies: «These issues are not peripheral. They are terribly central. But they are also *preliminary*. They are not the only program that I, or any historian of religions, would want to investigate for my entirely scholarly career. However, despite their preliminary nature, I can't get out of this corner, called "women and religion", that I've been backed into, until the discipline reforms itself so that we always deal with women and religion whenever we discuss religion»⁹.

More than twenty years later we can draw the balance that there has

9. Gross, 1977, p. 18.

been made advancement in gender research but the discipline has not yet reformed itself to the necessary degree. By the time gender has become a self-evident category for research in religions the feminist critique concerning the Study of Religions has reached its aim striving for a more accurate scholarship.

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