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# **Gender *in* Religion, Religion *in* Society:**

## **The Agency and Identity of Christian Women**

**Esther McIntosh**

### **Introduction**

Despite the early contention of the secularization thesis that traditional<sup>1</sup> religion, at least in industrialized nations, was in terminal decline, post-millennial (and pre-millennial) discourse frequently refers to the resurgence of religion (for example, Zeidan 2003; Thomas, 2005; Troy 2012; Riesebrodt 2014). Religion, in political discourse, is back on the agenda; consequently, the significance of religion for effective international relations and development policy is increasingly being recognized (see Tomalin 2015).

Moreover, sociological studies consistently maintain that women are more religious than men, especially with regards to affective religiousness (for example, Walter and Davie, 1998; Stark 2002; Sullins, 2006; Trzebiatowska and Bruce, 2012; Pew Research Center 2016). Sociologists have suggested a variety of explanations for this difference from the claim that male testosterone results in greater risk taking (Miller and Hoffman 1995) - whereas women are more prudential regarding any possible afterlife - to the claim that 'feminine' traits (whether biological or social) are linked with religiosity (Thompson 1991). Further claims

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<sup>1</sup> 'Traditional' is not always clearly defined; however, it can be broadly understood as referring to following longstanding identifiable religious norms and practices, such as attendance at religious buildings on specified days/times and following well-established patterns of worship/prayer/devotion.

include the suggestion that women's connection with childbirth (Martin 1967), and their limited presence in the 'secular' and 'rational' workplace, leads to community-seeking in religion (Luckmann 1967), as well as the assertion that women experience greater existential angst in relation to poverty, debt and aging and, hence, seek solace in religion (Norris and Inglehart 2008). Whatever the reason for the apparent 'gender gap'<sup>2</sup> in religiosity, any study of religion that excluded the experience of women would not be representative of its practitioners and would, therefore, be inadequate.

Yet, the post-Enlightenment/academic study of religion was more concerned with its rationalizing approach than with that which it was omitting (for example, see Capps 1995). By adopting a scientific method and seeking to understand religious practice as human activity, the supposedly neutral and objective study of religions followed an androcentric and colonialist agenda (Joy 2001). Not only did historians and sociologists employ 'religion' as a category by taking Christianity to be the norm and seeking to civilize that which it defined as 'other' and primitive (Fitzgerald 2000), the field of religious data explored assumed that the male experience accounted for the experience of all practitioners (Gross 1996). This approach began to shift in the 1970s, as universities started to offer courses in women's studies, and the influence of feminism spread to scholars of religion.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie gives the following definition of feminism: '*a person who believes in the social, political and economic equality of the sexes*' (2014: 47 italics in the original). A feminist approach to the study of religion, therefore, seeks to expose inequality: both the androcentrism hidden in the insider/outsider approach to the field, and the

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<sup>2</sup> For several decades the World Economic Forum, World Health Organization and the United Nations have been using the term 'gender' when measuring inequalities between men and women; consequently, they frequently use the term 'gender' interchangeably with 'women' and 'girls'. In this chapter, the term 'women' includes all persons who identify as women; likewise, 'men' includes all who identify as men.

androcentrism embedded in religion(s) that a purely phenomenological account of the data ignores (Saiving 1976; King 1995; Warne 1998). Consequently, by highlighting the manner in which women have been excluded from aspects of orthodox religion or have been socialized to accept positions of subservience legitimated by a gendered construction of religious hierarchy and power, feminism teaches us that we cannot examine gender and religion, as if gender is an additional extra in the field of study; rather, we must examine gender *in* religion.

Nevertheless, even while critiquing binaries of male/female and emphasising the importance of women's experience, the feminist study of religion has too often resulted in damaging universalizing, homogenizing and essentializing categories. For instance, the White woman has been represented as on a path to liberation, while the Black or Asian woman has been portrayed as a victim in need of feminist emancipation.<sup>3</sup> Hence, while the effort of colonizers in India to abolish *sati* bore the hallmarks of imperialist White men trying to save Brown women (Spivak 1988), feminist scholars of the Christian religion, such as Mary Daly, assumed Hindu widows were victims of patriarchal violence without fully studying the context in which the ritual takes place. Similarly, Daly's condemnation of female genital mutilation (FGM) bears the hallmark of a White woman trying to save Black/African girls rather than serious engagement with the contexts in which FGM operates (Daly 1978).

Furthermore, attempts by feminist practitioners of religion and feminist theologians to reconstruct or reread history, so as to uncover the forgotten women rendered invisible by their exclusion from male authored texts, tend to claim that religions intended equality rather than sexism; an original position that was distorted by patriarchal societies and their notions of men's and women's innate abilities, which infused religion with inequalities (see Holm and

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<sup>3</sup> White and Black are capitalized to emphasize that these are socially constructed categories.

Bowker 1994). Such an approach assumes that we can transplant ourselves from our socio-historical location and access the original intention of an ancient religion; this is a limited and problematic form of foundationalism.

By troubling the assumption that notions of gender – masculinity and femininity – are reducible to biology – male and female - feminism disputes the presumption that the valorisation of men over women is due to men's 'natural' masculinity. On the contrary, feminism reveals that it is not masculinity per se that is prized in androcentric religions: it is the masculine male who is valorised over the masculine female and over the feminine male (Castelli 2001).<sup>4</sup> Systemic sexism undervalues femininity, whilst demarcating women as inferior on the basis of a false connection between 'female' and 'feminine'. In addition, by contrasting male and female, masculine and feminine, as complementary opposites, androcentric religions valorise heterosexuality over homosexuality. Yet, the increasing awareness of persons who self-identify as non-binary and/or transgender, effectively 'queers' notions of biological sex, sexuality and gender; thus, presenting a challenge for religions that demarcate religious practice and observance along binary and heteronormative lines (Munt and Jenzen 2012).<sup>5</sup>

Trans and non-binary persons are not unique to the twenty-first century: eunuchs, hijra and two-spirit persons exist in ancient as well as modern communities, often in poverty; nevertheless, there is increasing visibility of LGBTQI+ persons in campaigns for rights across the globe.<sup>6</sup> Achievements in recognition, however, are frequently countered by a rolling back

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<sup>4</sup> The term 'gender-critical' has previously been used in religious studies to describe feminist scholarship, as found in Castelli's collection for instance, but contemporary usage of the term has become associated with transphobia and is, therefore, highly problematic.

<sup>5</sup> While criticism of a binary model of persons applies to the Abrahamic religions – Judaism, Christianity, Islam – more than to the Indian religions, for example, female inequality exists in both contexts.

<sup>6</sup> The most appropriate abbreviation for referring to LGBTTQQIAAP persons is not agreed upon by all those included in the 'rainbow umbrella', and whether it is helpful to group so many differing identities together is

of rights; as found, for instance, in Brunei, Indonesia, Kenya, Russia and Uganda. Regressive backlashes, such as these, are often bound-up with repressive social regimes that claim authority over the interpretation of religious texts, in attempts to justify discrimination of women and LGBTQI+ persons as divinely ordained and in keeping with holy scriptures.

Hence, we cannot separate religion and society as fields of study. We can only study religion *in* society, and in so doing we must acknowledge our own biases and starting points. All scholars have a role in the production of knowledge; we cannot 'bracket out' our identity. We are either beneficiaries or victims of an imperialist and colonialist heritage; we cannot ignore White privilege, cis privilege, class privilege, able-bodied privilege, or heterosexual privilege. Thus, we cannot separate the study of religion from the political motivations that drive it.

Consequently, the study of gender *in* religion *in* society must take account of intersectionality - of race/ethnicity, class, sexuality, gender, age, disability and religion - exposing gendered-oppression or exclusion that is legitimized by religion as well as that which is occasioned by outward expressions of religious identity, while guarding against the temptation towards othering, especially universalizing the other and representing the other as homogenous victim rather than particular agent (Crenshaw 1989; King 1994).

In what follows, I consider the manner in which the various waves of feminism, and criticisms thereof, have contributed to shaping the study of the Christian religion, especially women's participation therein. As particular metaphors of contention, I examine the concepts of female sacrifice and the maleness of divine imagery operating within Christianity to hold

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also debated. Stonewall tends to use LGBT; Amnesty International, the World Health Organisation and the United Nations use both LGBTI and LGBT. I have used LGBTQI+ to include non-binary and intersex persons who do not always feel included in the LGBT abbreviation, and the plus to indicate that asexual, pansexual and other identities are also included here.

back equality for female practitioners. Conversely, I explore the (re)turn to Christian fundamentalism in America focussing on the possibilities and limitations it affords for expressing female agency: power in women's ministries is precarious and achievable only along certain racial and heteronormative lines. At its heart, evangelical Christianity presents women with a clearly defined role in which motherhood is elevated and relationality is central; this has certain benefits and represents an especial challenge to feminist critiques of gendered roles. In Adichie's words: 'The problem with gender is that it prescribes how we *should* be rather than recognizing how we are. Imagine how much happier we would be, how much freer to be our true individual selves, if we didn't have the weight of gender expectations' (2014: 34 italics in the original).

### **Making (Some) Women Visible: The First Wave (bridging the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries)**

With the rise of first wave feminism and its focus on suffrage in industrial societies, awareness grew of the marginalization of women in the Christian religion and in society. At the Women's Rights Convention in Seneca Falls, New York in 1848, Elizabeth Cady Stanton spoke out against the inequality of the sexes found in Christianity. In particular, she challenged the scriptural legitimacy of that inequality and accused the male hierarchy of (mis)interpreting sacred texts to justify male dominance. She states: 'The canon law, the Scriptures, the creeds and codes and church discipline of the leading religions bear the impress of fallible man' (Stanton 1974 [1898]: pt I, 13). Galvanized by the realization that the 1870 revision of the Authorized Bible would take place without deeming it necessary to consult any women, thus repeating the patriarchal and misogynistic interpretations of the past, Stanton and her team of women, drew up *The Woman's Bible*. In the text, the women identify biblical passages that speak of

the equality of women and men; they challenge women to use their own mental agility to determine which of the contradictory and competing creation myths 'is more worth of an intelligent woman's acceptance' (Stanton 1974 [1898]: pt I, 18), and they conclude that the Christian subordination of women is wholly founded upon male misinterpretation of biblical material. In a damning indictment of the Church of England, Stanton asserts that: 'the most bitter outspoken enemies of women are found among clergymen and bishops of the Protestant religion' (1974 [1898]: pt I, 13).

Raised as a Presbyterian Calvinist, Stanton was well-versed in the Christian assertion that women should be submissive, on the grounds that they are not deemed capable of exercising rationality equivalent to that of men. As an adult, she rejected institutionalized Christianity holding its curtailing of women's agency to be incompatible with female emancipation. Together with the Quaker, Susan B. Anthony, her campaign for suffrage gathered pace, but not without promoting White supremacy; Stanton argued that White women should have the right to vote before Black men. Despite meeting Sojourner Truth, whose 'Ain't I a Woman' speech defied racial and gender inferiority, Stanton chose racism over inclusion to further her cause.

### **Reform and Accessibility: The Second Wave (1960s-1980s)**

Almost a century later, as second wave feminism rose in prominence, Mary Daly caused major controversy in 1968 with the publication of *The Church and the Second Sex*. Like Stanton and her horror at the idea that the revision of the Bible could take place without consulting women, Daly was equally dismayed when the 1965 meeting of Vatican II in Rome did not mark



a significant turning point for the inclusion of women in Catholic Christianity; on the contrary, only a few women were present and they were not permitted to speak. Drawing on Simone de Beauvoir's earlier critique of the position of women as 'the second sex' (published in 1949), Daly brings to the fore the opposing duality that is to be found in the Christian image of woman as the source of sin and the idealized virgin mother, Mary. In her exceptionally bold work, in which Daly calls-out the sexism of Christian sources, she also offers a positive account of scriptural passages that express equality, such as Genesis 1:27 'God created man in his image. In the image of God he created them. Male and female he created them' and Galatians 3:28 'There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus' (1985 [1968]: 192). Despite this valiant attempt to capture equality in the source material, Daly ultimately finds the patriarchy of the Bible and of institutionalized Christianity overwhelming and irredeemable. Hence, in *Beyond God the Father*, she states, famously: 'if God is male, then the male is God' (Daly 1973: 19). Following through on this conviction, she faced a legal challenge for excluding men from her Women's Studies classes at Boston College, USA. In her defence, she argued that women, having been socialized to defer to men, require women-only spaces in which to speak openly, without which their educational opportunities are curtailed.

Women had, thus far, been written out of history by male authorship; sacred texts had been penned and interpreted by men who paid little attention to the participation of women, or to the impact on women of religious requirements associated with women's bodily functions, such as menstruation and childbirth. Moreover, women were frequently excluded from or expected to remain silent during rituals, segregated from men in religious buildings, subjected to more restrictive dress codes, and denied access to higher status roles within their religion. A feminist re-reading of history attempts to recover missing women, to reveal

‘herstory’, to ask questions about women’s roles and experiences – their agency and identity - in religions across the globe (Gross 1977; King 1987).

This stage of the feminist influence on feminist theology, therefore, can be seen as a process of conscientization: an awakening to the silencing of women, the oppressiveness of male God-language, and a reclamation of positive images and role models. A pioneering practitioner in this respect is Carol Christ, whose early work on goddess symbolism opens up avenues of conversation and religious expression (1979). She states that: ‘Religions centred on the worship of a male God create “moods” and “motivations” that keep women in a state of psychological dependence on men and male authority ... Religious symbol systems focused around exclusively male images of divinity create the impression that female power can never be fully legitimate’ (Christ 1979: 275). Alternatively, the symbol of the goddess represents the freeing of women from dependence on men: it is an ‘affirmation of female power, the female body, the female will, and women’s bonds and heritage’ (Christ 1979: 276). In addition to rendering female power and authority legitimate, drawing on religious traditions ancient and modern, goddess spiritualities affirm women’s bodies and bodily functions by replacing menstrual taboos with new rituals; in contrast to patriarchal religion, goddess spiritualities value the wisdom of the aging ‘crone’, and celebrate women’s relations to one another as sisters and daughters. As a corrective to an historical emphasis on female bondage to fathers and husbands, goddess spiritualities foreground female agency; their signature is aptly captured in the finale of Ntozake Shange’s multi-award winning, provocative choreopoem, with the lines: ‘i found God in myself / & i loved her/ i loved her fiercely’ (1975/1997: 87).

Similarly, for the purpose of their own preservation, Rosemary Radford Ruether (1983) argues that Christian women should leave the institutionalized church, and its embedded sexism, forming an *ekklēsia* of women and making use of goddess imagery. Women-church

does not equate to the oppression of men, but rather to the survival of women through the denunciation of the androcentric interpretation of their religion that gives false theological legitimacy to their subordination in home and church. In women-church, Ruether explains:

Rather than defining women's relationship to God by their sexual relationship to men and through the patriarchal structures of family and church, a feminist Christian spirituality defines women's relationship to God in and through the experience of being called into the discipleship of equals, the assembly of free citizens who decide their own spiritual welfare. (1983: 349)

Ruether's account is contrary to the complementarity thesis found in patriarchal religions; that is, the narrative that women and men are different but equal, and, therefore, that male domination and power over subordinate and obedient females is both natural and divinely ordained. For women to have full access to participation in the roles and rituals of their religion, the complementarity thesis has to be contested; Nawal El Saadawi is a formidable pioneer who does exactly that. In Egypt in 1977, she courageously published *The Hidden Face of Eve* giving voice to the suffering of women in the Arab world.<sup>7</sup> Even though 'The great religions of the world uphold similar principles in so far as the submission of women to men is concerned' (El Saadawi 1980: 428), she asserts that patriarchy rather than religious ideology is the primary cause of female oppression, and yet, she declares 'where the cause of women was concerned, they [religions, explicitly Christianity and Islam] added a new load to their already heavy chains' (El Saadawi 1980: 428).

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<sup>7</sup> She has subsequently been imprisoned, lived in exile and received death threats.

Although religious studies and women's studies have existed in parallel to a large extent - scholars in women's studies frequently ignore the influence of religion on women's status and roles - theologians and scholars of religion learned from women's studies a distinction between sex and gender that proved useful for explaining and highlighting women's lowly status in religions and societies. Thereafter, awareness of the patriarchal construction and transmission of knowledge informed the interrogation of the supposedly value-neutral status of epistemology (more recently referred to as 'epistemic injustice', see Fricker, 2007). Nancy Chodorow, for instance, uses the work of Robert Stoller to support the claim that 'sex' is a biological category onto which 'gender' - understood as femininity and masculinity - is socially-inscribed (1978). Such inscription informs the claim that women, as a sex-based group, are 'natural' nurturers, due to their childbearing capacity, which, in turn, supposedly renders the characteristics of femininity – subservience, gentleness, humility, caring – innate. Likewise, in patriarchal societies, men, as a sex-based group, are assumed to be innately masculine, expected to exhibit dominance, strength, aggression and rationality. Consequently, in patriarchal religions and societies, women are portrayed as inferior to men who are regarded as being superior on account of these gendered traits. Chodorow, however, contends that these restrictive definitions of 'man' and 'woman', as masculine and feminine, superior and inferior respectively, can be corrected through resocialization; she calls this '(de)gendering' (1978: 24).

On the one hand, distinguishing between sex and gender helpfully challenges gendered stereotypes of feminine and masculine behaviours. On the other hand, it assumes that the body is neutral and passive in respect of role socialization; whereas, in reality, biological differences contribute to the marginalization of women in patriarchal religions and societies: menstruation, for instance, as a function associated with female bodies, is

associated with shame, modesty and cleansing rituals. Furthermore, the sex/gender distinction gives an overly simplistic impression of the valorisation of masculinity over femininity in patriarchal societies and religion; that is, the implication is that, via resocialization, women can throw off the shackles of femininity and no longer be deemed inferior to men. On the contrary, the same behaviours have rather different social significance depending upon which body enacts them. Like the suffragettes, women seeking ordination have been lambasted for the masculine behaviour they supposedly display by speaking in public and rejecting domesticity. Women avoid being reproved, therefore, in so far as they express their agency in gender-conforming ways (see Manne ; Bowler 2020).

### *Critiquing the Second Wave: Intersectionality*

During second wave feminism, two clear problems emerge which require redress within and beyond religious studies: the first concerns the uncritical acceptance of the binary female/male and its heteronormative assumptions; the second concerns the preoccupation with the concerns of White middle-class women in the minority/one-third world embedded in the slogan 'the personal is political' (Hanisch 1970).<sup>8</sup> Betty Friedan's landmark monograph *The Feminine Mystique* shifted the goal posts for bored American housewives with its radical critique of the social pressure on women to find fulfilment as wives, mothers and homemakers; she labels their dissatisfaction 'the problem that has no name' (1963: 5).

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<sup>8</sup> Texts from the 1980s and 1990s refer to the first world and the third world; these terms are reflective of White supremacy. Replacement of 'first world' with minority/one third world and of 'third world' with majority/two-third worlds more accurately represents the scale and numbers of persons involved.

Friedan's proposed solution is the promotion of self-actualization through meaningful work and mental stimulation. She receives sharp criticism for her narrow focus. bell hooks<sup>9</sup> writes:

Friedan's famous phrase, "the problem that has no name," often quoted to describe the condition of women in this society, actually referred to the plight of a select group of college-educated, middle- and upper-class, married white women – housewives bored with leisure, with the home, with children, with buying products, who wanted more out of life ... That "more" she defined as careers. She did not discuss who would be called in to take care of the children and maintain the home ... She did not speak of the needs of women without men, without children, without homes. She ignored the existence of all non-white women and poor women. (hooks 1984: 1-2)

As hooks implies, the labouring classes had always worked, in poorly paid jobs; moreover, Black women frequently worked as maids for wealthier White women. Hence, the boredom of the White middle-class and its proposed solution is bound up with the outsourcing of domestic duties to poorer Black women. In the service of supposedly delicate and fragile White women, Black women are stereotyped as hardy and inexhaustible caregivers. Black women are thus subjected to discrimination on the grounds of gender, race and class; these multiple layers of oppression are referred to by Kimberlé Crenshaw as 'the intersectional experience' (1989: 140).

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<sup>9</sup> She does not use capital letters in her name with the aim of focussing attention on her ideas rather than her identity.

Crenshaw and hooks were not alone in calling-out second wave feminists for exhibiting class-privilege and racial-blindness; alongside the White feminist critique of Christian patriarchy in the US at this time, African-American women, such as Delores Williams and Jacquelyn Grant, were exposing their experience of the triple oppression of race, sex and class within Christianity. Rather than refer to themselves as feminist theologians, they coined the term 'womanist', a Black folk expression used by Alice Walker (1983). Williams' work (1993) lays bare the biblical stories that evidence the multiple layers of oppression tied to androcentrism and social domination; she exhorts Christians to re-read those stories from the perspective of America's history of slavery and economic exploitation. For the African-American woman, the story of Abram and Sarai (Gen. 16:1-16; 21:9-21), rather than relaying an innocuous story of God's provision of a child, tells of the slave and concubine, Hagar, forced to be a surrogate mother and then abandoned, with God's sanction. By re-reading the biblical text in this way, Williams (1993) holds up to view the Whiteness of patriarchal God imagery, beseeching Black women to find God in themselves; she demands an answer to the question 'who do you say God is?' Similarly, in a 'coalition' with White feminists, such as Ruether, who interrogates the notion of a male saviour saving women, Jacquelyn Grant (1989) shapes a Christology from the position of racial oppression, scrutinizing the utilization of the image of the suffering Christ - Jesus on the cross - to keep Black women in positions of subordination. From this point forward, womanist theology draws on the image of a Black female Christ (Christa), as one who identifies with and frees Black women from their pain.

Proactive women from a wide range of perspectives - including Dalit (Swarnalatha Devi), Mujerista (Ada María Isasi-Díaz) and Latina (Ivone Gerbasi) - produced their own

analyses of religious androcentrism drawing on personal and local experiences.<sup>10</sup> Despite advocating for the academic study of women in religions, and for greater recognition of female academics engaged in those studies, second wave feminists tended to view African and Asian women as victims, caught up in irrational and oppressive religious and cultural practices. Academia was guilty of essentializing the experience of colonized women as 'other', whilst portraying White women and men as their liberators; Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak calls this the 'epistemic violence of imperialism' (1988: 28). Theological resistance to this imperialistic violence came from Hong Kong, Korea and Ghana in the works of Kwok Pui-Lan, Chung Hyun Kyung and Mercy Amba Oduyoye to name a few (King 1994). Their adeptness at constructing theologies that resonate with and empower previously colonized, frequently exploited and oppressed people contributes to a radical shift in the conversation from generalizations to particularities, from imperialism to post-colonialism, from the mainstream to those whose religious practice exists outside of orthodox spaces.

Liberation from oppression is central to the concerns of the feminist movements, but, as shown above, the means by which liberation is pursued can fail to encompass all oppressed groups. In addition to gender, race and class, sexual orientation can add a further layer of intersectional prejudice and oppression. Much of the analysis of sexism in society interrogates the status of women in heterosexual relationships leaving lesbians, bi and queer women out

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<sup>10</sup> 'Dalit' refers to lower caste members in India, subjected to 'untouchability', segregated and ostracised; it sometimes refers to all Indians living in poverty. Dalit theology borrows its Christian emphasis on 'a preferential option for the poor' from 1960s Latin American liberation theology; it emerges from a 1986 conference in Madras, where Devi highlighted the extreme poverty of dalit Christian women in Andhra Pradesh. Isasi-Diaz coined the term 'mujerista' to refer to liberation theology from the perspective of Latina women living in the US with sexism, ethnic prejudice and economic oppression. 'Latina' refers to Latin American girls and women: Gebara's feminist theology is concerned with the liberation of the poverty-stricken in Brazil; a Catholic nun, she controversially supports the legalization of abortion and the use of birth control.



of the field of reference; an exclusion that is exacerbated by patriarchal religions in which homosexuals, bi, trans and queer persons are regarded as sexually deviant and sinful.

While fundamentalist forms of Christianity rail against the immorality of homosexuality, liberal forms are more inclined to turn a blind eye than to campaign for equality. Hence, in her 1985 presentation on Lesbian Feminist Issues in Religion at the American Academy of Religion, Carter Heyward asserts that: 'the feminist and gay/lesbian demand (not request) that women and homosexual persons be affirmed (not tolerated) poses a challenge not only to the good ordering of liberal social relations, but also a threat to the essence of liberal religion' (1987: 37). Liberal religion, she explains, adopts a 'live and let live' approach, which is insufficient for redressing historical and persistent discrimination. In other words, women's agential expression of queer sexuality is curtailed when this aspect of their identity renders them unequal, maligned or ignored by their religion.

### *Locating the Study of Religion*

In the global north, the study of religions expanded substantially in the 1960s.<sup>11</sup> Academic institutions tended to house religious studies departments within theology departments; this meant that 'religions' were studied in opposition to Christian theology as 'other', and, further, that the conception of 'religion' was marked by a false distinction between the religious and the non-religious/secular. Thus, in Wilfred Cantwell Smith's words:

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<sup>11</sup> At this time, reference to the West/Western and East/Eastern was common, but this in itself reflects a particular position on the globe in respect of the rest of the world; namely, that of Europe and the United States. Instead, the terms 'global north' and 'global south' are now being used to reflect the socio-economic division of the world.

[T]he Secular Modern West has postulated that human nature is fundamentally secular ... Religion, then – a Western concept – is conceived as an addendum, something that some people have tacked on here and there in various forms, for one or another reason. This ideology has forged a series of concepts in line with its own basic presuppositions and in terms of which it could explain to itself the data of other ideologies, other cultures, other ages; could interpret without disturbing its own central convictions, the rest of humankind. (1983: 8)

Whether 'religion' is employed to mean the quest for salvation, belief in the supernatural/transcendent, ritual and myth, or doctrine and liturgy, the construction of religious studies as a scientific or analytic discipline, intended to enhance understanding of diverse cultures and practices, smuggled in theological categories. Rather than critiquing Christianity and the concept of secularism, religious studies made 'religion' an object of study, and in so doing, made 'being a Hindu something extra and above simply being human in a particular cultural and historical and linguistic situation' (Fitzgerald 2000: 43). Consequently, the beliefs and practices of cultures other than Christian ones became the focus of analytic studies whose starting point was a Protestant assumption that religion is a private matter, whereby the individual assents to a set of propositions.

Under the guise of the phenomenological and analytic study of religions, then, the peoples of the global south have been the subjects of supposedly objective data collection; in reality, Timothy Fitzgerald insists: 'The construction of 'religion' and 'religions' as global, cross cultural objects of study has been part of a wider historical process of western imperialism, colonialism, and neocolonialism' (Fitzgerald 2000: 8). As an imperialist and colonialist enterprise, religious studies shared with Christian missionaries the application of categories

that are at odds with the object of study; as a result, unfamiliar practices and beliefs have been deemed primitive and superstitious, inferior to those of the educated 'outsiders'. On the one hand, post-colonial religious studies, wary of passing judgement in an imperialist manner, risks constructing 'an idealized world of so-called faith communities – of worship, customs, beliefs, doctrines, and rites entirely divorced from the realities of power in different societies' (Fitzgerald 2000: 9). On the other hand, by engaging effectively with social and political sciences, religious studies exposes the power dynamics that underpin both the relation of religious societies to one another – the global north to the global south – and the relations of gendered-persons within those societies.

### **Girl Power, Digital Media and Sexual Assault: The Third (1990s) and Fourth Waves (2010+)**

A feminist re-reading of sacred texts, religious beliefs and practices moves from observation and reporting, to the utilizing of a methodology of deconstruction and reconstruction. In feminist theology, this requires a new hermeneutics (interpretation), which includes, in Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's words:

[A] hermeneutics of experience that socially locates experience, a hermeneutics of domination, a hermeneutics of suspicion, a hermeneutics of assessment and evaluation, a hermeneutics of re-imagination, a hermeneutics of reconstruction and hermeneutics of change and transformation. (1998: 76-77)

Third wave feminism, as the 1990s and 2000s is habitually referred to in the global north, became synonymous with the rise of 'girl power'. Parallel to the confidence embedded

in this expression runs a presumption that (privileged) women could achieve sufficient independence from structural patriarchy to be post-feminist. Admittedly, gains were realized and notable women smashed the glass ceiling in male dominated professions, but the emphatic language of empowerment in this phase relies on individual female strength, rather than collective feminist activism; moreover, it contains a damaging implication that women who are not treated as equal to men are weak. To speak of female power instead of victimization is, undoubtedly, positive and uplifting, but it places the burden of achieving equality on women; in the end, this disavowal of the structural underpinnings of inequality serves to preserve systems of male power. Thirty years later, female ordinands in Christianity and female CEOs in wider society are few in number, sexual assault and domestic abuse are common, and there is still a significant gender pay and gender data gap (Criado-Perez, 2019).

From the vantage point of advancement in education and workplace representation, middle-class women are, on occasion, assumed erroneously to have escaped the strictures of gender stereotypes; on the contrary, their liberation is not universal and frequently depends upon outsourcing of caring responsibilities to working-class women. On a sizeable scale, women are still confined by gendered expectations in the workplace, the home and in religion: labelled as 'difficult and emotional' compared with their contrastingly labelled 'ambitious and rational' male colleagues; responsible for the majority of housework, childcare and eldercare in their families and neighbourhoods; encouraged to support and serve religious men rather than lead them. In short, the hegemonic portrayal of femininity in mass media and in Christianity, in particular, reproduces and sustains the dominance of masculine males, and the expectation of heterosexuality.

Conversely, queer theology emerges in the 1990s and 2000s in opposition to sexual norms, deconstructing accepted theology and questioning its exclusions, seeking inclusivity.

In her revolutionary and sex-positive work, *Indecent Theology*, Marcella Althaus-Reid<sup>12</sup> draws on feminist and liberation theology to centre bodily-experience and marginalized people. She states:

[O]nly in the longing for a world of economic and sexual justice together, and not subordinated to one another, can the encounter with the divine take place. But this is an encounter to be found at the crossroads of desire, when one dares to leave the ideological order of the heterosexual pervasive normative. This is an encounter with indecency, and with the indecency of God and Christianity. (2000: 200)

By critiquing the unrealizable, ideological symbols of Mary as virgin and Christ as celibate, she constructs indecent theology as a corrective to the restrictive boundaries placed around that which is perceived to be acceptable sexual behaviour. Prevalent Christian morality presupposes that economic and sexual relations conform to patterns of heterosexual patriarchy. Even now, LGBTQI+ inclusion is latent; mainstream Christianity maintains an ambivalent position on same-sex marriage and sexual activity.

Nevertheless, in the last decade, marginalized Christians have been finding access to new avenues of support, speaking out and sharing experiences via social media. Propelled by the advent of the Internet, feminism is encountering a renewed impetus in what can be described as the digitally driven fourth wave. In conjunction with previous waves, choice remains a primary concern: women are not equal to men as long as their choices are

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<sup>12</sup> When she was made professor in 2006, she was the only female professor of theology at a Scottish university and the first at New College, University of Edinburgh. She died in 2009, aged 56.

subjected to gendered judgements; women are not free to choose if they are socially conditioned to avoid certain options and/or face obstacles that men do not face. Intersectionality has a more expansive meaning in the fourth wave, including transwomen and gender fluid persons, such that the oppression of women is understood to encompass gendered discrimination aimed at anyone presenting as, or being perceived to be a woman (whether self-identifying as a woman, as gender queer, as non-binary, as trans). Body-positivity and sex-positivity continue to loom large in fourth wave feminism; the digital nature of this wave is key to connecting with social media accounts dedicated to promoting empowering images and messages.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, this wave does not stop with self-empowerment; it represents a renewed impetus for challenging structural dynamics and power imbalances that valorise male masculinity and individualism.<sup>14</sup> In particular, the use of social media hashtags such as #MeToo,<sup>15</sup> #TimesUp, #IBelieveHer rapidly spread across the world with the aim of holding powerful men to account instead of victim blaming. Positively, digital media enables the vast collection of data relating to the extent of everyday sexism, preventing a simple dismissal of the problem; negatively, it enables comparably easy retaliation from misogynists in the form of rape and death threats.

For religious groups, fourth wave feminism inculcates an attitude of enquiry into the continued subservience of women and the layers of intersectional discrimination that Black, Asian, disabled, poor and LGBTQI+ people encounter within religion. Digital media provides an avenue through which religious women can find solidarity and support as they challenge authority, hierarchy and abuse. Awareness of the #MeToo hashtag prompted Emily Joy and

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<sup>13</sup> See, for example, the I Weigh Community, started in 2018 by Jameela Jami: <https://iweighcommunity.com/>

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, The Good Men Project, founded in 2009 by Charlotte Startin and Jessica Sakey: <https://goodmenproject.com/>

<sup>15</sup> Initially used by Tarana Burke in 2006, it was adopted as a mark of solidarity amongst women following the widespread allegations of sexual abuse against Harvey Weinstein in 2017.

Hannah Paasch to start the #ChurchToo hashtag bringing to light both the prevalence of sexual abuse in faith communities and the devastating spiritual abuse employed to conceal it;<sup>16</sup> in opposition to the concealment, the hashtag #SilenceIsNotSpiritual swiftly followed.<sup>17</sup> In essence, concepts of female sacrifice and the maleness of divine imagery are continuing to hold back equality within Christianity. For instance, in its 2006 document, *Responding to Domestic Abuse*, the Church of England finally acknowledges that it has not only failed to grapple with the problem of abuse in its midst, it has authorized ‘overbearing and ultimately violent patterns of behaviour’ (Archbishop’s Council 2006: 18) by engaging in uncritical use of male God-language. Moreover, it recognizes that the Christian theology of humility has been ‘misapplied to women’ (Archbishop’s Council 2006: 19) and that ‘the example of Christ’s sacrificial self-giving has ... encouraged compliant and passive responses by women’ (20). Yet, the document stops short of re-imagining the divine or dissecting biblical passages that endorse the submission of women; on the contrary, it calls for a ‘deep interpretation’ (Archbishop’s Council 2006: 17) of male God-language and continues to propose that ‘genuine self-denial ... is a gateway to abundant life and a means of bringing good out of evil’ (20). The 2017 update includes a legal definition of coercive control and recognizes spiritual abuse, but it stops short of advocating equality, stating: ‘a consequence of sin is that a man will rule over his wife, it is not God’s best plan for humanity, before the fall men and women were equal’ (Church of England 2017: 43); this recourse to prelapsarian theology merely serves to sustain the narrative of female submission and male domination.

### *Heterosexuality and White Privilege: Megachurches and the Return to Fundamentalism*

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<sup>16</sup> The hashtag started with Christian churches/groups, but expanded into variations for other religions, such as #MosqueMeToo for Muslims and #GamAni for Jews.

<sup>17</sup> See <https://silenceisnotspiritual.org/>

Moreover, even where Christian women obtain positions of leadership, their gendering as feminine constrains their presentation and activities. For example, in her study of American megachurches,<sup>18</sup> Kate Bowler examines the role and status of ‘the preacher’s wife’. Despite steady decline in mainstream church attendance, megachurches in the States have seen unprecedented growth.<sup>19</sup> By their very nature, the size of a megachurch (ranging from two to forty thousand participants) changes the relationship between the preacher<sup>20</sup> and the congregation: it is impossible to establish a one-to-one relationship with all attendees. Through technology – from television evangelism, YouTube sermons, music production, in-house publishing and social media hashtags – the church leadership team is able to supply the congregants with a constant stream of endorsed input and advice in the form of sermons, Bible studies, prayers and songs of worship. Thus, in order to be successful, the megachurch preacher needs a brand image and a marketing strategy. Not only must the preacher appear to be a healthy, good looking, well dressed, happy man; he must present a model of idyllic (heterosexual) family life where God’s blessing is evidenced by his beautiful wife and children.

His wife is confined by a ‘a limited set of feminine virtues’ (Bowler, 2020: 5), namely, that of wife and mother; she must devote herself to her husband, her children and her home. Additionally, as the wife of a megachurch preacher and part of his brand image, she must appear by his side with a winsome smile. In so doing, she walks a narrow tightrope between

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<sup>18</sup> Megachurches are Protestant with two thousand or more regular attendees. There are approximately 1,500 megachurches in America.

<sup>19</sup> Similarly, in Britain and Europe mainstream church attendance has been in steady decline since the 1960s, alongside some growth in megachurches since the millennium. Megachurches in Britain and Europe are not as numerous as in the US with membership ranging from two to twelve thousand. Examples include Hillsong Church, Kensington Temple, LIFE Church and New Wine Church.

<sup>20</sup> Leaders/Heads of megachurches go by a variety of designations: preacher, pastor and so on; key to their role is that of giving sermons/preaching.



the expectations of her religion and the expectations of contemporary America: 'Church tradition says women are subject to their husbands, and American culture privileges egalitarianism, so women should be on stage, but a step behind their husbands' (Bowler 2020: 20).

American megachurches are evangelical in ethos, drawing their understanding of the role of the preacher's wife from a specific interpretation of certain biblical passages that support complementarian theology. Genesis 2:18 (NIV) states: 'The LORD God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him."<sup>21</sup> Essentially, the status of the preacher's wife is as her husband's helpmeet, in (unpaid) service to him and his congregation. In her supporting role, she is prohibited from preaching sermons to mixed congregations, based primarily on selected verses from the New Testament, such as: 'I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet' (1 Timothy 2:12). Nevertheless, as Bowler notes, the wives of megachurch preachers have 'negotiated places for themselves' (2020: 4). Leading women-only conferences and events, they exert their agency and obtain powerful positions of influence in Christian circles through self-help books, counselling sessions, worship sessions, home and family advice groups and hashtags; whilst staying within the confines of their permitted functions by regularly reminding their audiences of their husband's approval and their subjection to God's authority. In Bowler's words, they engage in 'a delicate dance between professed submission to men and implicit independence from them' (2020: 4-5).

Furthermore, the personality and appearance of the megachurch preacher's wife are judged both by the standards of patriarchal religion and the demands of the capitalist

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<sup>21</sup> The NIV translation is commonly used amongst evangelical Protestants.

marketplace. Occupying centre-stage in their Christian communities, albeit under the authority of men, the wives must be youthful, slim, charming, calm, fashionable, vulnerable but not too flawed: 'They must be hard-working but not competitive, polished but not fussy, wholesome but not perfect. And as famous women, they must do what all famous women do and pretend to be average, subject to the acid test of "relatability"' (Bowler 2020: 13). Their position remains conditional: if they complain too much, appear ungrateful or challenge male authority; if they wear clothing that is too tight or reveals too much skin, or they simply put on weight; they may lose their celebrity status overnight and with it their legacy. For a preacher's wife, the ascent to power and life in the spotlight is precarious and continues only as long as she remains within male-defined categories of acceptability; as Bowler reports: 'Male patronage [is] essential in shielding women from the accusation of transgressing by overstepping set boundaries' (2020: 242).

Gender is not the only constraining factor for Christian women in leadership; race remains a significant factor also. IF:Gathering is the largest Christian women's conference in America, numbering over 100,000 viewers and followers. Following a four year study of IF, Kelsy Burke and Amy McDowell find that 'IF cultivates an illusion of racial diversity while amplifying the voices of white women' (2020: 9). Even whilst engaging in diversity projects, White women's voices remain centre stage, literally, foregrounding White speakers and the White saviour trope. Middle-class White women share stories of their outreach to impoverished women and children living locally, as well as self-funded missionary work to the global South. By portraying attempts at racial inclusion as acts of friendship, they avoid critiquing the fundamental structural inequalities behind their actions; likewise, by employing the language of choice, they evade distinctions of class and race implying that all women are able to lead other women. Apparently unaware of White privilege, they 'assert that an all-

loving God, not a white-dominated religious institution, is the one making decisions about who leads' (Burke and McDowell 2020: 3). Middle-class White IF women are agential within the parameters of patriarchal femininity and the norms of White male evangelical Christianity; that is, as Burke and McDowell find, they do not use their considerable platform to disrupt male power or the White status quo.

Black and Asian women, thus, face additional obstacles compared to White women in realizing their potential as leaders in evangelical Christianity. Furthermore, the fundamentalist ethos of evangelical churches is notoriously homophobic and natalist, even believing that progress towards LGBTQI+ rights is an infringement on the religious freedom to profess and uphold discriminatory beliefs and practices (Bowler 2020: 231). As a result, the agency of Christian lesbian, bi, queer and transwomen is severely restricted in evangelical churches; their identity and sexuality is a source of condemnation. Additionally, since marriage and procreation are the norm, single and/or childless women are subjected to searching personal questions (Aune 2008; Llewellyn 2016). In the face of such overwhelmingly heteronormative religious teaching, Christian women may find empowerment through acquiescence rather than resistance; this choice, however, represents a particular challenge to feminist scholars in religious studies who, in the global north at least, tend to assume that religion can only ever be a source of oppression for women.

Consequently, the small but significant rise of the biblical patriarchy movement is instructive in understanding the contemporary appeal of demarcated gender roles, colloquially known as the Quiverfull Movement, based on Psalm 127:3-5: 'Children are a heritage from the Lord, offspring a reward from him. Like arrows in the hands of a warrior are children born in one's youth. Blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them'. Mary Pride, an activist in the movement, blames women's exhaustion from juggling housework, childcare

and paid employment on feminism; she does not protest against men failing to do their fair share at home (Pride 1985/2010). She offers a solution that requires women to relinquish all independence and decision-making; she reaffirms a biblical model of wifely submission and childrearing (Pride 1985/2010).

In her examination of the movement, Kathryn Joyce explains that, 'as a secular feminist who writes about religion', she was 'surprised to realize the detail and complexity of the antifeminist lifestyle ... proposed for women' (2009: x). She notes that media investigation remains superficial and contends: 'That's a shame, because these ideas about gender hierarchy and women's roles have a yet broader resonance' (Joyce 2009: xi). In the US there is an explicit Islamophobic agenda behind the movement with Quiverfull families aiming to outbreed Muslims; girls are encouraged to forego higher education in order to marry and give birth as quickly and as frequently as possible (Joyce 2009: 4-5). Prior to marriage, girls and boys are segregated unless supervised; all children are home schooled to inculcate a conservative Christian worldview (based on Deuteronomy 6, especially verses 6-7: 'These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children') that avoids contamination by what are deemed to be the sinful – sex, drugs, homosexuality, contraception, abortion – and secularizing influences of state schools (Joyce 2009: 189-90).

Viewed from the outside, such movements appear to be decidedly anti-feminist; the women therein appear to relinquish agency, ceding power to a male overlord. However, viewed from the women's perspective, choosing to join a conservative Christian group can be seen as prudential. For women lacking support networks, dissatisfied with social demands on their appearance and sexual availability, the appeal of friendship groups bonded by a belief in an overarching divine plan for humanity should not be underestimated. Instead of suffering

from trauma and overwhelming social expectations in isolation and confusion, bible-believing women profess a narrative that makes sense of their life and offers a deeper meaning to human existence. Alongside empowering opportunities to lead and influence women (albeit ministries that are somewhat invisible and unacknowledged, given the male figureheads who retain public recognition), the prescribed gender-based bifurcation creates a readymade network of peers to assist with childcare and spiritual healing. In addition, female submission in the pursuit of motherhood can have socio-economic benefits; for fundamentalist Christian women, motherhood/homemaking is not simply praised as an ideal occupation, it is accompanied by an emphasis on the responsibility of men to provide financial and emotional security for their families. Hence, as Brenda Brasher attests: 'the restrictive religious identity they [fundamentalist Christian women] embrace improves their ability to direct the course of their lives and empowers them in their relationships with others' (1998: 4).

As noted above, however, the option of finding fulfilment through mothering, and thereby reaping the rewards of a patriarchal, natalist religion, is a course of action limited to heterosexual, married women capable of childbearing/childrearing. Furthermore, the idealization of reproduction runs counter to feminist narratives that lament the burden of motherhood. For fourth wave feminists, the persistence of biblical patriarchy appears to be a reassertion of the status quo and a shoring up of White privilege, and yet, not one that can be explained by portraying women as passive victims. On the contrary, for White, cisgender, heterosexual women who find societal change and expectations to be a cause of deep anxiety and insecurity, the prescribed identity and community of fundamentalist Christianity gives them reassurance. Contemporary feminist scholarship in the fields of religion and theology, therefore, faces the dual challenge of comprehending the desire of the privileged to escape

the fight for equality, whilst continuing to highlight the intersectional oppressions that biblical patriarchy maintains. As Arvind Sharma and Katherine Young state:

[F]undamentalisms and their analogues have ostensibly upheld the traditional gender role of wife and mother for women. And this response to modernity puts down the gauntlet to women scholars come of age during the heyday of the women's movement, which fought to eliminate such restrictions (Sharma and Young, 2007: xiii)

## **Conclusion**

We cannot, then, begin to understand the degrees of agency exhibited by Christian women if we focus solely on the patriarchal nature of their religion; the identity of religious women is both a reaction to secular society and an interweaving of ideas of egalitarianism within a framework that promises benefits for those willing to accept its rules. Feminism – understood as the claim that women have a right to social, political and economic equality with men - has changed the texture of religious and theological studies dramatically; it has brought to consciousness the myriad ways in which androcentric religions and patriarchal societies overlap to maintain the subordination of women. Scholars of religion have fought for acceptance in the academy and challenged the epistemic injustice that results from equating the male norm with the human norm. Nevertheless, feminist theologies and feminist studies in religion have also come under scrutiny for essentializing women's experience, speaking on behalf of women in the global south and operating with a sex/gender distinction that assumes

heteronormativity, thereby excluding LGBTQI+ women. Despite the growth in queer theology, the inherent heterosexuality in the ordering of male and female relationships along the lines of a complementarity thesis found in Christianity invites homophobia; in addition, it assumes a binary account of biological sex and leaves the door open to transphobia. Feminist scholars of religion must do more to expand the boundaries of data beyond male-female relations, and to avoid essentializing definitions of 'womanhood' that assume 'assigned female at birth' by including the narratives of transpersons (see Beardsley and O'Brien 2016).

While the recovery of herstory and goddess worship has the potential to be empowering, a wider recognition of the limitations of these enterprises is required: there is no golden age of pre-sexist religion that we can retrieve; neither has goddess worship furrowed deep in-roads into patriarchal conceptions of the divine. Feminist scholars of religion must continue to grapple with the reasons why women choose to accept and follow stereotypical definitions of femininity, whilst bringing to light women whose religious practice results in social discrimination. Contrary to the assumption of secular theorists, then, religious studies needs to keep making the case that gender can only be understood *in* religion and that religion can only be understood *in* society. From the perspective of the women involved, fundamentalist religion is not equivalent to relinquishing all agency; rather, agency is expressed in supportive women's gatherings which benefit those included. Inclusion is not universal, however; the intersectionality of race and sexuality remain sites of discrimination that warrant persistent critique.

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