The Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion

Edited by John R. Hinnells
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Chapter 12

Gender

Darlene M. Juschka

What is gender? What is sex? What is gender/sex?

Historical prelude

Gender as a category of analysis has operated in a variety of ways depending on pedagogical location or historical period. For example, in sociological studies gender consists of the study of sex roles in pre-industrial and industrial societies. Or, historically in Europe, gender has simply been the natural designation of the sexes as opposite since the eighteenth century. However, in the 1960s gender became a central category of feminist studies. So for example, in feminist language studies gender becomes the means by which to look at the erasure of women by the generic term ‘man’ and the thingification of women as the object of the male gaze.

The development of gender as a category of analysis can be seen in the work of Margaret Mead and Catherine Berndt, for example, as a slow transformation of the belief in natural sex-roles and sex-role assignments to an analysis of the social construction of these roles. In other words, people like Mead and Berndt began to think about how the labor and roles given to men and women may have less to do with biological certainties and more to do with societal demands. These anthropologists examined women’s ritual activities and beliefs among pre-industrial peoples, a focus that had been hitherto overlooked by their more androcentric colleagues. They found that the women they investigated tended to operate in a separate female sphere with rituals, symbols, and myths centered on such concerns as fertility and birth, economics, healing, or the well-being of the society, e.g. tending ancestors, the land, or myth cycles. They also became aware of two significant issues in the study of human society: one, the erasure of women and their activities from all fields of knowledge; and two, that women and men’s gendered practices, e.g. work, parenting, status, were in fact social roles that were secondarily assigned as sex roles. Under the influence of first- and second-wave feminism, then, the analysis of women as gendered, gender relating to both the oppression of women and creating a new subject of study based upon women, was established.

What is gender?

Gender is something we all know, or think we know. We immediately categorize people (or most everything, e.g. language, animals, planets, or inanimate objects) on the basis of their gender. We categorize ourselves repeatedly by ticking the appropriate
Complicating the category of gender

Judith Butler (1992) and Christine Delphy (1996) also argued that treating sex as a fixed and immutable truth of human existence not only confuses the analysis, but also expresses a necessity to adhere to a closely organized system of beliefs, values and ideas without question or thought. In Delphy’s effort to make apparent how taxonomies are products of the social and therefore equally socially encoded, she pushed the analysis to include sex, male and female and the variations therein, as a social construct. She argues that sex, like gender, is a social and historical category and not a natural category. Sex is not a natural category because we already understand it in accordance with gender. We read sex through the lenses of gender. As such, sex is a social and historical category. She further argued, as we read sex through a gender lens, gender precedes sex and not the reverse (1996: 30). Therefore, our understanding of men as physically strong and women as physically weak is a socially created truth enforced by, for example, girls being discouraged from developing muscles and boys being encouraged to develop muscles.

Such an argument would appear to be counterintuitive. But following the development of the category of gender in academic discourses, Delphy suggested that gender as a concept was founded upon ‘sex roles’ – a line of analysis that looks at the division of labor and the differing statuses of men and women. This line of thinking, developed primarily in sociology and anthropology, was picked up and used by feminists. The category of sex, then, in this reasoning, consisted of biological differences between the male and female while gender was the cultural manifestation of these differences or, as she states, ‘a social dichotomy determined by a natural dichotomy’ (1996: 33). Delphy asked; why is it assumed that sex would give rise to any sort of classification? Her argument proceeded from the position that:

sex itself simply marks a social division: that it serves to allow social recognition and identification of those who are dominants and those who are dominated. That is that sex is a sign, but that since it does not distinguish equivalent things but rather important and unequal things, it has historically acquired a symbolic value.

(1996: 35)

Delphy’s position was clear: both gender and sex are social constructions.

Speaking of sex and its history

In 1978 the first volume of Michel Foucault’s Histoire de la Sexualité (Paris: Gallimard) in French and English The History of Sexuality (New York: Pantheon) was released. The series in the end would consist of three volumes, and as the title promises, the category of sexuality would itself be historicized. To historicize sex and sexuality was to recognize that different periods of time produced different conceptualizations of sex and sexuality. Foucault’s work has implications for all those who think about the categories of gender and sex. Following Foucault have been many writers who continue to think about changes and breaks in the discourses of sex, sexuality, and gender.

box on a form to indicate our gender. We are careful to enter the proper washroom, and choose particular apparel appropriate to our gender. We presuppose gender as it is manifested in all aspects of our lives. As such, we do not question gender. However, under the influence of second-wave feminism gender as a category of analysis emerged. Gender, in this formulation, was seen to be a way to understand the oppression of women by men. The category of gender, then, was developed in order to think about how social systems, cultures, and religions, for example, were gender coded and how these codes impacted upon women and men. This coding was seen to define, regulate, and circumscribe the group named/marked women. Equally the coding was seen to define and regulate the group called men, but as man and human were synonymous, it afforded this group privileges it did not afford women, e.g. men as priests in Catholicism.

From here, then, gender ideology, which was seen to construct and mystify (locate in nature) inequalities between men and women, became an operative analytical tool in feminist theorizing. It was used to examine religious, social, national formations and operations, and further, under the sign of postcolonialism and/or international feminisms, to examine political, social, cultural relations between nations and countries. For example, in feminist postcolonial theorizing it became apparent that often countries and their populations colonized by the West were feminized and, as such, were understood as irrational and highly sexual in comparison to the masculinized West. A good example of this is Rudyard Kipling’s poem ‘The White Man’s Burden’ published in 1897. In response to this feminization, the elite men of colonialized locations often demanded the subjugation of the women of their nation via a strict gender differentiation. A good example of this is the discourse around the veil in twentieth-century Middle Eastern identity politics. Gender ideology was also used to examine economic, historical, medical, and ethical discourses, to name but a few, and their contribution to the production of knowledge. This knowledge, then, that seeks to explain human social, political, cultural organization, and production was determined to be gender coded.

In the development of gender as a category of analysis, gender was separated from sex. Sex, male and female, or the two-sex model, was seen to be a natural fact or the biological reality that gender overlays. What is assumed in such a formulation of gender is that sex is real and gender is artificial, or sex is an abstractive (outside of history) natural fact of human nature, while gender is a social and historical construction built upon that natural fact. Linda Nicholson (1994) comments that when gender and sex are thus formulated sex is not dealt with as a conceptual category, but a biological truth. As such, then, gender becomes the conceptual category that is hung upon the ‘coathanger’ of sex. Formulated as such, sex is fixed and immutable while gender is social, historical, and mutable.

In this perspective, then, an assumption resides that sex is neutral or carries no inherent value. Gender, however, carries value and this value is subsequently placed on ‘normatively’ sexed bodies. Indeed, these sexed bodies are not just human bodies, but can include all plants and animals. When such proofs as plants and animals are used, they are then called upon secondarily to uphold the truth of the naturalness of the category of sex. However, in due time, the mid- to late-1980s, this kind of understanding of sex and gender, or what is call the gender/sex dimorphism was called into question (see Gilbert Herdt 1994).
Thomas Laqueur (1990), influenced by Foucault, examines the social and historical nature of the category of sex. He argued that a one-sex Aristotelian-Galenic model of human sexuality was operative prior to the 1800s in Europe. In this model of sexuality female was misbegotten and generally inverted and male properly begotten and generally extraverted. A one-sex model, then, was used to define the natural state of the female and male of the human species. Subsequent to this the two-sex model emerged wherein female and male sexes are understood to be opposite:

By around 1800, writers of all sorts were determined to base what they insisted were fundamental differences between the male and female sexes, and thus between man and woman, on discoverable biological distinctions and to express these in a radically different rhetoric... Thus the old model, in which men and women were arrayed according to their degree of metaphysical perfection, their vital heat, along an axis whose telos was male, gave way by the late eighteenth century to a new model of radical dimorphism, of biological divergence... (1990: 5–6)

The implication of Foucault and Laqueur’s (see also Blackwood 1999, Brown 1988) historicizing of sex and sexuality was the disclosing of sex from the realm of nature to locate it in the realm of the social, at least for those who were convinced. Foucault made apparent that sexuality, and sex therein, as much as gender, was politically charged category that was intimately related to power. Foucault (and Laqueur), in his historically-political foray into sex, wished to discover or rather uncover how sex and sexuality were discursively formed: ‘What is at issue, briefly, is the over-all “discursive fact,” the way in which sex is “put into discourse”’ (Vol. 1, 1990: 11). Sex, then, like gender is a discursive construction with implications of power. Although Foucault does not read sex through the sign of gender as Delphy does, he equally recognizes that sex is a category that is central to ‘the order of things’ and as such is a way that we organize ourselves. Like gender, then, sex has intimate relations to the dissemination of power in discourses, and religions have often been powerful and authoritative disseminators of the ‘truths’ of gender and sex. For example, in Christianity during the witch-craze or witch-hunt in Europe (1450–1700) women were understood to be more inclined toward evil because of their ‘normative’ feminality. Signed as inclined toward evil and in league with the devil, all ages of females were tortured and murdered in numbers estimated conservatively to be 200,000. Or during the same period in India, women who outrivaled their spouses were encouraged or forced to commit Sati. Sati is the act of a widow being burned alive with the body of her dead husband.

**Elaborating a model of gender and sex**

Gender, as an academic category of analysis, has been greatly debated since the 1980s. The majority of analyses focused on two categories, gender and sex, as indicated above. In this kind of analysis, gender is examined as a social category and sex as a biological category. Although this split rendered gender very useful as a category of analysis for purposes of the study of religions, the theoretical difficulties this split raised began to be discussed in studies of sexuality, under the influence of Foucault, and in feminist theorizing. With theorists like Foucault it became apparent that sex was itself socially constructed and demonstrated a historicity of its own. The work produced by feminist academics in religious studies called into question the biological givenness of sex (e.g. the female as inherently evil and weak and the male as inherently good and strong), as a category of analysis and, furthermore, sought to theorize gender and sex as produced in and by the social (e.g. male as inherently good meant he was closer to deity and therefore naturally in positions of power such as a religious leader). But, by grounding gender/sex in the social and material two significant problems have emerged.

The first difficulty encountered, notably discussed in the 1970s, was that gender and sex were dealt with as separate formative elements of human identity so that sex was seen to establish kinds of bodies, while gender was thought to subsequently shape those bodies. In this understanding sex marked bodies as differentiated (fixed) while gender invested such marking with meaning (mutable). Here gender is seen to follow naturally from sex, or gender and sex are seen as superficially connected in a consecutive fashion, e.g. male is to man and female is to woman. What is not clearly theorized, then, is how gender and sex are interrelated and dependent upon each other for definition. Understanding that gender and sex are interrelated and dependent means they need to be understood as related to each other by the tension and interaction (dialectics) between the two categories. In this kind of understanding, gender and sex are related in a formative and primary fashion, e.g. man is to male as woman is to female.

The second problem that emerged in the 1980s was the lack of theorizing the interdependence of the categories of gender and sex. Instead gender and sex were presented as if they were interchangeable categories or simply synonyms. In this kind of analysis the dialectical (tension and interaction) mechanisms of gender and sex are eroded. This theoretical position meant that gender ideology, or the power operations of social inequalities based on gender and sex, could not be adequately analyzed. Understanding gender and sex as oppositional categories, the layering of gender and sex, or the blurring of gender and sex are all equally problematic. Without a clear theorizing of the dialectical relationship between gender and sex, studies continue to produce work wherein one or both the categories are reified (understood as things rather than concepts) and therefore resistant to a thoroughgoing analysis.

The difficulties encountered in the theorizing of gender as a category of analysis can be usefully pedagogized to the following issues: (1) essentialism (the gendered body remains fixed according to evolutionary requirements, e.g. man the hunter, female the gatherer) versus constructionism (the sexed body is mutable reflecting the social roles and lives situated in particular social and historical surroundings); and (2) the lack of a theory of gender and sex.

Some of the most successful studies of gender/sex have emerged from two areas of study: feminist cultural studies (the study of cultural productions from a feminist deconstructive perspective, e.g. film, media, and written text) and queer theory (deconstruction of the discursive production of sexuality and gender, e.g. challenge to heterosexuality as normative sexuality as presented in Genesis 1:27). In both of these locations there has been the recognition that the categories of gender and sex each require careful delineation and intersection. Feminist theorists in the study of religion have directed their attention toward this challenge and the analysis of gender and sex, as ideology (gender/sex), should prove a fruitful trajectory for the continued development of the categories of gender and sex.
The importance of gender/sex in the study of religion

If, in the study of religion, the scholar is to understand the structural development of the system under study, and to understand the means by which that system is communicated, if s/he is to grasp why deity in the Tanakh (Hebrew Bible), for example, takes on both masculine and feminine attributes, then certainly how gender and sex are understood and used to express belief about existence in ancient Hebrew systems of religious belief is necessary to know. Examining the complexities of gender/sex, as produced in the social (e.g. myth) and signed on the level of the metaphysical (e.g. symbol) and enacted on the level of the biological (e.g. ritual), means engaging the study of religion as a human signing system. A human signing system refers to language, art, stories, and traditional practices and the like used to express beliefs about existence, the world, the human, male and female, or deity.

To engage religions as human signing systems requires paying attention to such things as who is speaking, in other words, the person, the group or institution that is generating the discourse, and to whom the discourse is directed. By tracking the who and the whom in the communicative event, by paying attention to what is at stake, and investigating what kinds of persuasions proliferate one is better able to elucidate their understanding of social systems. Toward this end, then, one will want to examine gender/sex as they are delineated through religious discourses. An example of this kind of analysis is Helen Hardacre’s study of a Japanese new religious movement Buddhist Rishōkōshikai.

In her study Hardacre relates how Buddhist Rishōkōshikai had been co-founded by a woman, Nagamasa Myōko, but after her death in 1957 there was an internal power struggle. Out of this struggle emerged a new myth of origin, one that erased Myōko as a co-founder of the group. Instead her male co-founder was given sole recognition. At one particular gathering of the women of the Rishōkōshikai, who had come together in order to celebrate the anniversary of their female founder’s death, the importance of Myōko within the movement was undercut directly by reference to her gender/sex. At this gathering a male elder, in support of the new male genealogy of Rishōkōshikai, spoke to these women about gender/sex and to do so drew on gender ideology to validate the new male genealogy. This was done, of course, in order to assert the legitimacy of masculine domination. To do this he naturalized men’s domination over women via reference to femaleness and maleness in the ‘state of nature’.

You women know that in the animal world, it is the males who are the most powerful. Take the gorilla for example – did you ever hear of a female gorilla leading the pack? . . . And it is the males who are prettiest. Whoever paid any attention to a drab female duck? . . . Being the stronger and most powerful, naturally the males are the most attractive as well. What I’m trying to tell you today is that it’s the same way with human beings. It’s the men who are superior, and the women who are behind all the trouble in the world. (Hardacre 1994: 111)

Delineated in a specific gender-based narrative, there is a necessity to understand how gender/sex operate on the sociopolitical level in order to know what is at stake for the speaker and the listeners. Clearly the male elder was attempting, via his use of biology, to locate men over women. But equally that the women of the group had come together to celebrate their female founder’s death anniversary indicates that they were resisting the new myth of origin that located the founding of Rishōkōshikai with only its male co-founder.

Equally, when doing a gender/sex analysis another aspect that requires attention is awareness that the discourse of the hegemonic elite (those limited few who have control and power over the social, economic, political, cultural, and religious domains) is not the sole or only representation of the religion or culture. Often the views, perspectives, religious activities, and so forth of a small elite group of men have been, and continue to be, used as representative of the entire group. In this formulation any contestation and differences within the group related to class, race, or gender/sex are erased. To ignore such social categories as status, gender/sex, sexuality, race, or class that speak about power and that point to the particulars of social formations is to ignore the social and historical parameters of the system of belief under study. Engaging gender and sex as interrelated categories of analysis in the study of religion clarifies the object of one’s study.

In the past, under the influence of enlightenment epistemology, wherein the category of the human was the origin and basis for much theorizing done in the study of religion, complexity and diversity within an analysis were erased in order to ensure the subject of European philosophy, man. This man haunted, and in some measure continues to haunt, theorizing in religious studies, anthropology, sociology, philosophy, history, or science. At the same time, those studies that have shifted from this perspective continue to remain marginal in the university. Focusing solely on this man not only misses the social complexity and the structures that hold the religious edifices in place, but also distorts the analysis. Paying attention to gender/sex, sexuality, race, and class allows us to theorize the structures and understand better the multifaceted complexity of human social bodies.

The gendering of religions

The intersection of gender/sex and religions has been of interest to a number of theorists who study religions. Over the last five decades excellent work that looks at the ideological implications of gender/sex in the study of religion, or how gender and sex effect and affect the practice of religion, has been produced. These kinds of studies share a common interest in examining how religion has been one method to ensure the subordination of women in a variety of social and cultural locations, and the absence of women as living persons within the development and dissemination of religions. Such studies have sought to reveal the power imperatives and to bring women as subjects back into the various religions under study. From here those interested in the intertwining of gender/sex and religion have developed analyses that examine historical and social shifts in a variety of cultures as registered by gender/sex, the political efficaciousness of gender/sex, and linked to this, the intersection of gender/sex with colonization. The interrelated categories of gender and sex provide a means and a way to understand not only the how and why of religions, but equally the how and why of social organization and the manufacturing of culture in and of itself.
male and female appearance and behavior calls on nature to legitimate his view. In this passage Paul understands that it is a disgrace for women to have short hair and dishonorable for men to have long hair. Working within the honor-shame oriented culture, the maintenance of social standing is intimately linked to honor and for men to attempt to appear masculine (short hair) and therefore elevate their status is a disgrace, while for men to appear feminine (long hair) means a loss of social status and therefore dishonor. Male and female hairstyles, then, are culturally coded and reflect a gender ideology.

Second, she sought to make apparent women's activities in the early Christian communities through a feminist hermeneutics of remembrance. In this gender-sensitive methodology she would examine not only the actions and contributions of men, but also those of women in these communities. Finally, by combining the hermeneutics of suspicion and remembrance, she developed what she termed a feminist critical hermeneutics of liberation. Through this model she hoped to be able to reclaim Christian history for concerned women and men of all nations, colors, and sexual orientations without engaging in Christian apologistics.

Gender and religious practices
The kinds of analyses indicated above represent some of the work of feminists in the study of religion through the 1970s and 1980s. Feminists, having learned the need to restate and rethink religious and historical texts, went on to think about how the interrelated categories of gender/sex shaped the knowledge and the systems of belief that women produced. A particularly influential thinker working in this frame is Susan Storr Sered and her comparative text Priestess, Mother, Sacred Sister: Religions Dominated by Women published in 1994. There were of course other texts published in a similar vein, for example, Diane Bell’s text Daughters of the Dreaming published in 1983. In such texts, theorists took gender/sex as their cue and began to examine the religious orientations, creactions, and inclinations of women. At the center of their studies was an interest in women’s symbolic discourses and how women’s symbolic discourses might differ from men’s.

Sered’s introductory chapter in Priestess, Mother, Sacred Sister briefly relates how the author engages the category of gender specifically in order to think about what might be central to women’s religiosity and how this might be different from men’s religiosity. This question, circling around the category of gender/sex assumes from the outset that if indeed there is a difference between men’s and women's religious...
beliefs and actions, that this difference could be related to their differing social lives.
She notes that cross-culturally women of differing social groups share concerns such as childcare and motherhood, which of course intersect with economic, social, physiological, and psychological concerns. Connected to this explicitly is child rearing and related to child rearing is healing. These appear to be issues that are often at the center of women's religiosity and as such suggest a gender/sex difference.

However, as Sered notes, men and women's religiosity are more alike than they are unlike. Although concerns may demonstrate gender/sex differences, both women and men make recourse to superordinate beings (singular or plural), both use ritual to imaginatively interact with these beings, and both have central myths that organize the system of belief. As female and male are not opposite in sex, so women's and men's religions are not opposite in religion. Sered (1994: 8–9) suggests that when men and men's religiosity do differ, it is related to how superordinate beings are imagined, e.g. Jesus as feminine as among the Shakers of the American Colonies; the how and why of engagement with superordinate beings, e.g. through possession to heal the afflicted as with the Zir cult in the northern Sudan; the shaping and understanding of ritual actions, e.g. women as ritual leaders; and the way that they engage such issues as existence, e.g. women's ritual power as social power as with the Sande secret society in Sierra Leone and Liberia. But equally important to women and men's religiosity is the issue of power. Religiosity can and does confer power, whether on the basis of gender/sex, status, race, prestige, or age and is a means by which power is delineated or contested. Because of the propensity of gender/sex to be related to power, it is necessary to analytically engage gender/sex head-on when studying religion.

Gender/sex and performance

Jashnith Butler in her formative text Gender Trouble, first published in 1990 (10th anniversary edition 1999), equally suggests that it is gender that supports the category of sex and not the reverse. Following up on this, she makes an extended and complex argument demonstrating what is at stake politically when the category of sex is left as fixed and immutable beneath the category of gender, heterosexism. Linked to heterosexism, she argues, is the idea that individuals are trapped, not by biological imperatives as feminism had challenged this by socializing the category of gender, but now by cultural imperatives, since feminists had left the category of sex untheorized. She states that '[i]nstitution of a compulsory and naturalized heterosexuality requires and regulates gender as a binary relation in which the masculine term is differentiated from a feminine term, and this differentiation is accomplished through the practices of heterosexual desire' (30). Butler clearly and succinctly demonstrated how gender in feminist theorizing continued to uphold 'normative' ideas concerning sex and gender to the peril of a feminist analysis and its claims to be liberating.

Added to this keen observation, Butler made another equally important observation that gender/sex is performed. Butler, a feminist poststructuralist, underscored in her text the political imperative affiliated with the categories of gender/sex, and asked what might be the effects of such an imperative. This question allowed her to conjecture how identity itself was a political category with gender/sex central to this identity. Linked to this, then, was the necessity to perform gender/sex, so that those who ascribe to (are ascribed to) the category female must perform as feminine or those who ascribe to (are ascribed to) the category male must perform as masculine. Furthermore, those ascribed as male, but desiring to the female, could perform as feminine and those ascribed as female, but desiring to the male, could perform as masculine; although this was done at their peril, as they would be disciplined for transgressing gender boundaries. Butler argued '[t]here is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results' (33).

In the field of religious studies, particularly ritual, the instability and performativity of gender/sex are immanently apparent. Most visible in rites such as female and male circumcision, one sees the instability of sex as a natural category since the cutting of the body's genitals, the primary site of gender/sex, is used to properly fix the sex of the initiate. Furthermore, one notes the necessity to perform as woman or man in the acceptance of the cut that moves the child who would shrivel, to the adult who would capture it between clenched teeth.

Gender/sex and historicity

In the text Spritual Women: Gender, Religion and Cultural Identity in the Nepal Himalaya (1996) Joanne C. Watkins, an anthropologist, is concerned with the 'interplay between changing trade patterns, gender meanings, and cultural identity in Nyesung society' (4). Her concern, among other things, is to chart the changing gender ideology under the pressure of trade with the larger world. The interrelated categories of gender and sex, formulated in relation to religious beliefs, cultural systems and imperatives of kinship relations, are shifting and that these shifts register change in the social body and in the smaller social identity of the group (Buddhist). In this kind of formulation, gender/sex, then, provides a window not only into understanding a cultural system, but provides a way to chart changes within a cultural system. It is this latter function, a window for understanding social and cultural change, for example, that has led some to assume that gender/sex was a means by which to determine religious fundamentalism, rather than a means by which to chart change. In other words, rather than assume a change toward more austere gender relations marks a shift toward fundamentalism, one should recognize that gender/sex actually becomes a means and a way to mark change in itself. Gender and sex, then, as they are both social categories are historical categories that reflect changes in the belief system over time (see also Laura L. Vance, Seventh-day Adventism in Crisis: Gender and Sectarian Change in an Emerging Religion (1999) who also registers changes in the social body by using the category of gender/sex).

Gender/sex and politics

The categories of gender/sex are a central concern in Patricia Jeffery and Amrita Basu's edited text Appropriating Gender: Women's Activism and Politicized Religion in South Asia (1998). In this text, as the title suggests, gender ideology acts as a category to register political activism. Basu states that 'in the past decade or so, religion and gender have become increasingly intertwined in the political turmoil that envelops South Asia' (3). Women, the gendered category, have, in some locations, become the repository of religious beliefs, and the keepers of the purity and integrity
of the community' (3) felt to be under attack by the increasing globalization generated by such institutions as the World Bank, the World Trade Organization, the International Monetary Fund, and the United Nations. As noted above, gender and sex are not static categories and indeed register shifts and change in social bodies and, as the authors note, can become the means by which to initiate or resist social change. For example, the state, which can take on the masculine in relation to the feminized social body, can act as a paternalistic force that oversees the social body ensuring its proper functioning. It can be the state, as evinced in the United States in the early twenty-first century, that calls upon a particular gender ideology, heterosexual and masculine in this instance, to shore up and protect a social body it perceives to be under attack. The twin totems, symbols of American masculinity, attacked and fallen in September of 2001, initiated a hypermasculine response of excessive militarism that was launched against the feminized Middle Eastern 'other.' 'Gender provides,' as Basu rightly comments, 'an extremely fruitful lens through which to interpret the actions of the state and of ethnic and religious communities' (5–6).

Gender/sex: where to from here?

As I hope I have made clear in the above, the interrelated categories of gender and sex are infinitely useful categories by which to interrogate and understand religions. In many ways gender/sex is a signing system that acts as a window that allows the viewer to see the complexities of human existence. Gender/sex, although still not a central category of analysis in the study of religions for many theorists, must be further sounded to push our understanding of human social and cultural systems. For example, in my own work I have sought to make the mythological ground of gender ideology. This has been a process of revealing or bringing to consciousness the binarism that continues to fuel the ways in which we understand gender/sex. To first uncover the logic of binaarity, noting that a significant root binary in most cultural systems is the male/female binary, and then to underscore the linguisticality of binaarity allow for the socialization and historicization of binaries and subsequently, gender/sex. Yet this does not fully reveal just what is at stake in gender ideology.

First, gender ideology includes sex as a mythological discourse. The foundational quality of myth – its apparent rootedness in nature – means that the social, historical, and political aspects of gender and sex are elided. As I have indicated, both gender and sex, as dialectically related categories, must be submitted to a thoroughgoing social and historical analysis. Second, what is at stake in gender ideology is power. Although this would seem evident, evidently it is not. 'I am a man' or 'I am a woman' seem not to be political statements that mark power. But indeed they do, such terms mark social power. Therefore to analytically engage gender/sex is to understand a significant aspect of the complexity of human signing systems mapped through that which we call religion.

Note

1 First-wave feminism refers to women’s political and social action to provide women with both political and civil rights in the west activities in the mid-1800s and early 1900s. Second-wave feminism refers to women’s political, social, cultural, and legal activities and analyses, beginning in the late 1950s and continuing to the present, toward addressing the oppression on women. Both first- and second-wave feminists are terms used to designate the rise and resurgence of western feminism and do not refer to the rise and resurgence of feminisms of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in, for example, India, the Middle East, or Latin and South America. Third-wave feminism is a current term that is used to reflect a shift toward technology, globalization, and international feminisms that began in the mid-1990s.

References

Bell, Diane (1993 [1981]). Daughters of the Dreaming. 2nd edn. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press. Bell’s comprehensive and thoughtful text is an ethnographic study of Australian Aboriginal women’s rites, symbols, and myths. What Bell makes apparent is the importance of Aboriginal women’s ritual work toward the development and maintenance of the Dreamtime.

Blackwood, Evelyn and Saska E. Wieringa (eds) (1999). Same Sex Relations and Female Desire: Transgender Practices Across Cultures. New York: Columbia University Press. This text is a fine collection of historical, sociological and ethnographic studies of transgendered practices. Focused upon women’s same-sex desire, the category of gender is shown to be intimately connected with and foundational for the category of sex, while sexuality intersects with both sex and gender in a definitive fashion.

Brown, Peter (1998). The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christian Society. New York: Columbia University Press. Brown’s text is a wonderful engagement with the category of gender/sex in the formative years of Christianity. Under the influence of theorists such as John Winkler, Brown makes apparent the historicity of the categories of gender and sex, and how these categories, understood differently in the ancient world, were central to the ideological formation of a ‘rational’ Christian society.

Butler, Judith (1999 [1993]). Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity. New York and London: Routledge. This is a formative and pivotal text that is understood to be one of the founding texts of queer theory. This text engages the feminist category of gender, pointing to the short-comings of the theorizing of the category of gender and undermining the heterosexism that is prevalent in this theorizing.

Delphy, Christine (1996 [1993]). ‘Rethinking Sex and Gender.’ In Diana Leonard and Lisa Adsins (eds), Sex in Question: French Materialist Feminism, 30–41. London: Taylor & Francis. Delphy’s article is a logical and coherent analysis of the category of gender as it has operated in feminist theorizing from 1970 until 1990. She engages the concept of gender and demonstrates the limited nature of ignoring sex as a social and historical category.


Hardacre, Helen (1994). ‘Japanese New Religions: Profiles in Gender.’ In John Stratton Hawley (ed.), Fundamentalism and Gender, 111–133. New York: Oxford University Press. This article is an interesting and well-documented discussion of the category of gender/sex and how it is used in religions to limit the political and social power of women in Buddhist Rishōshūzai.
Chapter 13

Insider/outside perspectives

Kim Knott

Many students who have come to study religions at the university where I work have been introduced to the subject through a course called ‘Religious Lives’. The purpose of the course is to develop an understanding of religions and their study by means of an examination of the autobiographies and biographies of a variety of religious people – what we might here call ‘religious insiders’.

The students come as ‘outsiders’ to these stories; but they also have their own stories, their own subjective experiences which they are asked to reflect on and write about during the course. They are the ‘insiders’ in these accounts. The process of thinking about other people’s religious lives as well as their own raises many critical questions and issues for discussion during the course. Can we ever fully understand someone else’s experience? What is the difference between an account of a religion by an insider and one by an outsider?

Does translation from one language to another bridge a gap or create a barrier between the person telling the story and the one reading it? Additionally, we find ourselves considering the nature and limits of objectivity and subjectivity, ‘emic’ and ‘etic’ positions, ‘experience-near’ and ‘experience-distant’ concepts, empathy and critical analysis, the effect of personal standpoint, and the process of reflexivity. We even find that some of the lives we read about make us ask whether it is actually helpful to distinguish between insider and outsider perspectives. We will come to these matters in more detail shortly, but my purpose in listing them here is to show the range of concerns that are related to the insider/outside debate, many of which have been at the heart of the study of religions since its inception as a discipline distinct from theology. The debate challenges us by raising questions about the extent and limits of our knowledge and understanding. It invites us to consider whether or not our field of study is scientific.

It has an ethical dimension, and a political one.

Insider/outside perspectives in the history of the study of religions

These questions came to the fore from the mid-1980s in a highly charged debate about the nature of Sikh studies and the contribution and motivation of particular scholars writing on Sikh religion. Who could understand and represent Sikh traditions? What were the personal motivations, epistemological standpoints and ideological interests of those who studied Sikh history and theology? As we shall see towards the end of this chapter, the issues in this debate eventually extended beyond the problem of the insider/outside, but the problem was certainly of central