The Impact of Gender on Religious Studies

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In Religious Studies, which as a field employs a number of approaches from different disciplines – philosophy, psychology, anthropology, history, literary theory etc. – it is difficult to find one cohesive definition or method that would apply unilaterally to gender studies. There are various strategies that have been used to challenge existing models of women, men, and of sexual relations from a gendered perspective. These question whether such models have any definitive influence, let alone provide timeless or essentialist ideals. In addition, women today are contesting, from both philosophical and theological perspectives, whether God has any gender, especially that of a privileged male who presides over all other modes of reference. There have also been a number of recent books with titles such as *Queering God*, or *Queering Religion* (Althaus-Reid 2000; Goss 2002; Loughlin 2007), that challenge the basic heterosexual norm as it has regulated gender roles in the Christian tradition specifically.

Two thinkers who have had an indelible effect on the way that gender is now understood are Sherry Ortner and Judith Butler. Until the early 1970s, gender was generally regarded simply as a grammatical qualifier. Ortner's classic essay in 1974: "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture", changed that. Although Ortner tried to explain her position without resorting either to a strict sense of biological determinism, or excluding women from some participation in culture, she nevertheless typecast women as having an intimate relation to nature. Also, by drawing this analogy of a divided model of male/female with that of the separation of culture and nature, Ortner only served to reinforce an existing binary system. As Ortner (1996: 175) herself admits in a later retrospective appraisal of this early essay: "Behind my rethinking are larger shifts in the conceptualization of 'culture' in the field of anthropology as a whole, in the direction of seeing 'cultures' as more disjunctive, contradictory, and inconsistent than I had been trained to think". In a manner that is similar to Ortner's changed view of culture, gender is also now regarded as a more flexible category rather than a normative prescription of behaviour.

In her turn, Judith Butler's postulate of gender as "performativity" has stimulated many charged reflections – both positive and negative. In books written after *Gender*

Trouble (1990), Butler has clarified her views that acquiring gender is not simply a voluntary or arbitrary act, but is always embedded in a cultural matrix with its continually reinforced norms. For Butler (2004: 27), it is necessary to recognize and protest against the imposition of these "hetero-regulative" practices, where gender reinforces sex, so as to "unsettle" or "undo" their prescriptions. Since *Bodies that Matter,* her use of "queer" as the site of this contestation – implying a form of both distortion and querying heterosexuality – has also had wide appeal (Butler 1993: 228).

Both of these understandings of "gender" as either normative or malleable have had a wide impact in various works in Religious Studies, but what I intend to do in this essay, without spending time searching for the most appropriate definition, is to trace the development of the way that the term has been used in a number of representative works over the course of the last 15 years. This overview is not exhaustive, but it is indicative of the variety of ways that the word "gender" has been adopted and applied.

Gender as equivalent to the word "woman"

Many books can be found that do not explicitly theorize, let alone problematize, the concept of "gender", The word is used in a general way that is virtually equivalent to referring to women, as well as to female roles in society. One early example of this is a book edited by Ursula King entitled *Religion and Gender* (1995). There was an article I contributed to that volume entitled "God and Gender: Some Reflections on Women's Invocations of the Divine" (Joy 1994). In both my article and the book itself, "gender" had general connotations of "female" and "feminine", as well as actual women, and many of the other articles had a critical feminist intent. There was neither any reflection on the meaning of the term "gender", nor any attempt to clarify the various meanings of the ways that it was employed.

Gender as descriptive historical roles

Other early books understand "gender" as referring to both "male/masculine" and "female /feminine" roles and characteristics as representative of a society's view of behaviour pertaining to each sex. Such books indicate an awareness that such roles can change over time, but there is no enquiry into the origin or genealogy of these roles, nor is there any criticism of them. An example of this descriptive approach can be found in *Patterns of Piety: Women, Gender and Religion in Late Medieval Reformation England* (2003) by Christine Peters. It is an historical study that traces the effects of the Reformation on women, which Peters (2003: 2) refers to as the "gender impact". This development becomes especially evident in the changing practices of piety. Peters depicts a gradual movement after the Reformation towards a more practical Christocentric mode of parish piety that differed from the former monastic and mystical variety. The seemingly paradoxical views of medieval times where women were simultaneously characterized as more prone to piety, yet also more liable to

sin – especially the sins of the flesh – seemed to be fading. Traditional gender stereotypes that characterized men as rational and self-controlled, and women as weak and emotional, were also less emphasized. Yet, even though sin was now assessed in proportion to the degree of responsibility one was accorded, attitudes towards women were still problematic. Peters (2003: 346) observes:

> The weak, emotional temptress could be seen as less culpable than both the man who succumbed to her sexual charms, and her husband who had failed his duty to guide and control her. Moreover, that both interpretations were present in varying degrees in late medieval culture added to the ambiguities of gendered experience, as too did the apparently contradictory stereotype of the godly woman.

Because the book's aim is basically that of an historical description, however, there is no evaluation from a feminist perspective of the implications of this change for the prevailing ambiguity of women's status within a continuing male-controlled religious hierarchy.

The analysis of gender as essentialism

While Peter's book could not be regarded as accepting any "essentialist" descriptions of women, certain other historical works have been criticized for simply describing gender roles in their historical setting. In this connection, Kathleen Biddick's essay "Genders, Bodies, Borders: Technologies of the Visible" (1993) is a criticism of Carolyn Bynum's book *Holy, Feast, Holy Fast* (1987), that examined the lives of medieval Christian mystics. Biddick questions both Bynum's notion of the female body and her seeming acceptance of the myth of a triumphant *Christianitas*, with its inevitable elisions and omissions. In her careful scrutiny, Biddick documents how Bynum's treatment of the "medieval woman saint's body" unproblematically accepts the characterizations of women as reflecting not just an historical, but a pregiven, maternal reality. As Biddick (1993: 397) notes: "The model of gender in *Holy Feast, Holy Fast* assumes that gender is an essence that appears prior to other categories and informs them; that the feminine mirrors, indeed reduces to, the female reproductive function; that the female body is the originary, foundational site of gender."

Biddick's claim is that neither gender nor sex is inherently determinative – indeed, they are both culturally constructed. Rather than taking Bynum's study at face value, Biddick reads her work as a problematic case-study of the production of specifically gendered knowledge. As such, Biddick asserts that it contains a lesson for today (390). Thus, instead of taking such engendered values as a given which, in Bynum's case, equates a women's body with the maternal, Biddick (1993: 390) asks: "How can we write these histories such that in making women 'visible' we do not blind ourselves to the historical processes that defined, redefined and engendered the states of the visible and the invisible?" In other words, Biddick is concerned with what has been omitted in such an ostensibly realist portrayal. She wonders what Bynum excluded by her acceptance of women's maternity, in both its spiritual and physical sense. Biddick is alerting women historians to recognize that an unquestioning depiction of circumstances ignores the obvious manipulation and imposition of values.

Gender as a critical analytic category

Another approach that employed a critical evaluation is evident in a volume edited by Kari Elisabeth Børresen, *The Image of God: Gender Models in the Judaeo-Christian Traditions* (1995). This work is a response to the way in which particular facets of gender have been designated as not simply appropriate or essentialist, but even mandatory for women. The different contributors to this edited volume all evaluate the manner in which the concept of *imago dei* has been diversely interpreted over the centuries. The notion that has predominated is that it is man alone who is *theomorphic*, i.e. made in the image of God. As her main analytical category, Børresen (1995: 1) employs the phrase "human genderedness" – which she describes as "the sense of a combined biologically given and a socio-culturally shaped female and male existence". She argues that such gendered attributions are neither innate nor normative, but culturally determined. Børresen's principal intention, which is theologically motivated, is to illustrate, through an appeal to both Christian scripture and tradition, that she understands revelation as a continuous process, not a *fait accompli*. Her own interpretation of the creation of two sexes invokes the Biblical passage where both male and female are created in the image of God (*Genesis* 1: 26–28). For Børresen, this passage supports the full inclusion of women in human god-likeness. As a consequence, it is not only men who are to be acclaimed as theomorphic. In this context, Børresen employs gender as an analytic tool of interpretation – but it is an approach that also carries critical theological resonances. She supports contemporary claims by women that they should be fully accepted as equals within their Christian religious tradition as they are created, both body and soul, in the image of God.

Gender as a tool of cultural analysis

Two further studies of gender roles and qualities that also regard them as being neither innate nor universal, are anthropological in nature, but fit within the scope of Religious Studies. Both of these investigations add to the growing repertoire of meanings of the term "gender". In her book, *Spirited Women: Gender, Religion, and Cultural Identity in the Nepal Himalaya* (1996), Joanne Watkins uses the word "gender" in a seemingly neutral sense. She describes what she terms the "egalitarian gender configurations", i.e. the roles and relations of the *Nyeshangte* people of Nepal. In this Buddhist society, Watkins portrays the gender relations and roles adopted by men and women as complementary and non-hierarchical. In addition, there occurs what Watkins calls a "gender variance", where the terms "male" and "female" do not define naturalized or essentialized roles. This indicates for Watkins that certain roles are interchangeable. Within such a setting: "neither men nor women are . . . prevented from participating in their society's two central institutions: international trade and Buddhist ritual practice" (Watkins 1996:16). As a result, in this society women perform religious rituals because they are not "denigrated nor are they regarded as polluting". Though Watkins makes no explicit commentary, there nevertheless seems to be an implied gender comparison with western religious practices. In these religions one of the reasons given that women cannot act as ritual special-

ists, is the traditionally accepted attitude towards menstruation as being unclean or polluting.

Another anthropological study that ostensibly depicts gender in a neutral guise is undertaken by Susan Sered in *Women of the Sacred Groves: Divine Priestesses of Okinawa* (1999). For Sered (1999: 7) "gender" functions, similarly to Watkins, not as "an immutable fact of life or state of being, but rather [as] an expression of social processes". In her study of Henza society of Okinawa, Japan, Sered (1999: 6) finds a "non-hierarchal complementarity – including gender complementarity – as a pervasive pattern in Henza ritual, social life and cosmology". Her specific interest is the priestesses who are the sole ritual officiants for their people and who, in the exercise of their role, become the actual embodiment of the divine presence of the *Kami-san* (loosely translated as "spirits") – in both their male and female forms. Here women are accepted as the sole ritual officiants for their society and not regarded as inferior to men.

Both of these books explicitly describe their understanding of gender as a tool of cultural analysis. Yet in their descriptions of the established cultural patterns of the societies they are investigating, the authors' positions are not entirely neutral as claimed. This becomes particularly obvious in Sered's work when she states: "In the West, gender is understood to be naturally and existentially connected to sex [biology]," Sered (1999: 232) then continues by observing that such "naturalization of [gender] differences is a precondition for hierarchy". Her inference appears to be that the west can learn much from societies such as the Henza where the connections between sex and gender are not regarded as automatically natural, and thus do not appear predisposed to ranking the sexes in degrees of spiritual merit.

Gender as a mode of subversive disturbance

The next two examples mark a definite change in approach, particularly because they employ "gender" in both a theoretically sophisticated and critical mode. They have been influenced by the work on gender undertaken by Judith Butler and Joan Scott. These models interrogate accustomed frames of reference that align sex with specific gender characteristics that are then accepted as natural, if not essentialist, from a religious perspective.

In *God, Gender and the Bible* (2002), Deborah Sawyer introduces the ideas of Judith Butler, as well as those of the early Luce Irigaray, to disturb traditional gender categories in the Bible. By using Butler's unrevised concept of gender as "performative" from *Gender Trouble* (1990), Sawyer allows that, because prescribed gender behaviour often depends on politically expedient ideologies, rather than on any intrinsic characteristics, it can be subverted. Such a strategy depends initially, in Butler's work, on acknowledging the category of gender as performative – that is, as an enactment of roles that can be assumed at will, often with the intent of parodying established norms. This is similar, in some respects, to Luce Irigaray's device of critical mimesis. As a mode of deconstructive reading of philosophic and psychoanalytic texts, this tactic is deployed to reveal the control mechanisms of gendered assignments, especially in their privileging of the male position – be it an intellectual, social or religious one (Irigaray 1985: 76). What both of these approaches advocate

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is a disturbance of accustomed gendered priorities by a more fluid construction of gender that replaces the traditional binary allocation of male and female to enact specific gender roles. Gender becomes a multivalent category, liberating sex from its primary identification with the procreative functions of sex. In these critical models of both the early Butler and early Irigaray, one can ideally – though to my mind, not unproblematically – parody and expose the artifice of such gendered regulations.

By arguing that the Bible itself contains the potential for such gender modifications, Sawyer applies this theory to the story of the pious widow, Judith, in the Hebrew Bible. Judith deliberately adopts the wiles of a seductress to first beguile and then decapitate the Assyrian General, Holofernes, an arch-enemy of Israel. Sawyer (2002: 97) states: 'The chorus of women recognize the achievement of [this] unconventional warrior, and we are able to observe how gender games have been employed to subvert the expected, entrenched norms of this ancient socio-political context." The irony of this story, however – and this does not escape Sawyer's notice – is the latent message embedded in this text. This warns men to beware of siren women, for it may literally cost them their heads. But perhaps the ultimate irony of such a role reversal is not simply the possibility that God can work in mysterious and unpredictable ways. Unfortunately, in the larger context of the Bible, this particular incident virtually falls into insignificance – overwhelmed by a predominantly male ethos that views itself as being divinely ordained as dominant in the order of creation.

Gender as strategic destabilization

If such deconstructive mimesis and parodic disturbances have only limited effect – are there other works available that propose more potentially effective strategies? One book that provides further assistance is *Playing for Real: Hindu Role Models, Religion and Gender* (2004), edited by Jacqueline Suthren Hirst and Lynn Thomas. In surveying certain prescribed gender models for Hindu women, whether they appear in sacred texts, myths or popular stories, Hirst and Thomas observe interventions of authority and power latent in these stories, particularly in their directives for proper conduct on the part of women. What is of marked interest to Hirst and Thomas is the social and political contexts that determine these assigned gendered roles. In their Introduction to the volume, Hirst and Thomas recognize the complexity of both the reception of and resistance to such role models, inflected as they are in India by caste, age, economic status and political allegiances. Suthren and Hirst acknowledge their theoretical debt for this intricate social analysis to the postcolonial feminist writings of, among others, Rajeswari Sunder Rajan (1993) and Kumkum Sangari (1987).

Perhaps, however, the most evident influence on their work is that of the American historian and social critic, Joan Scott and her theory of gender. In her work, *Gender and the Politics of History* (1999), Scott depicts the category gender as a critical agent of destabilization. Its intention is one of transformation. To achieve this, Scott (1999: xi) believes that the following questions should always be asked of a historical text from a critical analytic perspective:

> How and under what conditions [have] different roles and functions been defined for each sex; how [have] the very meanings of the categories 'man' and 'woman' varied according to time and place; how [were] regulatory norms of sexual deportment created and enforced; how [have] issues of power and rights played into questions of masculinity and femininity; how [do] symbolic structures affect the lives and practices of ordinary people; how [were] sexual identities forged within and against social prescriptions.

Such a radical programme endeavours to promote investigation of the particular circumstances of all such historical instantiations. In so doing, the hope of Scott, as well as of Hirst and Thomas, is to demonstrate that there can be no ahistorical, let alone "essential" definitions, particularly on matters of sex and gender, insofar as they prescribe ideal behaviour for women.

Reflections on normativity

All of these critical reflections on gender have not been without opposition, especially from more conservative and fundamentalist forces. Judith Butler (2001: 423) describes her astonishment when she learned of the manoeuvrings of the Vatican in the lead-up to the Beijing conference on the status of women in 1995: "The Vatican not only denounced the term 'gender' as a code for homosexuality, but insisted that the platform language [of the conference] return to the notion of sex, in an apparent effort to secure a link between femininity and maternity as a naturally and divinely ordained necessity." Joan Scott (1999: ix) also reports on another occurrence in the United States around the same time, when a sub-committee of the United States' House of Representatives entertained submissions that warned morality and family values were under attack by so-called "gender feminists". It would appear that both the Vatican and the neo-conservative groups in the United States had seemingly been informed of Butler's, if not Scott's work as well, and their questioning of traditional gender roles. In their depiction of this threatening situation, the opponents of "gender" insisted that "gender feminists" regarded manhood and womanhood, motherhood and fatherhood, heterosexuality, marriage and family as "culturally created, and originated by men to oppress women" (Scott 1999: ix). Nonetheless, in one sense, these foes of gender were perceptive because they did sense that "gender", as it was being used by Butler and Scott, had become, for a time, a key term for women who no longer wished to assume that biology dictated destiny. Legal theorist Drucilla Cornell (2004: 37) clarifies this change: "Gender as an analytic category was the creation of second wave feminism, which came to dispute openly the idea that biological differences between the sexes could ever be used – even affirmatively – to justify women's participation as citizens."

The responses by conservative elements to the use of gender as a critical tool have brought about extremely significant changes in the thinking of critical theorists, such as Judith Butler. Despite the fact that she is still regarded as the figurehead of the polymorphous play of gender-bending, Butler has since recognized the need for concerted political action on the part of women in response to recent reactionary religious and political activity. She has stated: "Although many feminists have come

to the conclusion that the universal is always a cover for a certain epistemological imperialism, insensitive to cultural texture and difference, the rhetorical power of claiming universality for say, rights of sexual autonomy and related rights of sexual orientation within the international human right domain appears indisputable" (Butler 2001: 423). This is in keeping with certain developments in her thinking since *Gender Trouble* (1990). In both *Bodies that Matter* (1993) and another later interview "The End of Sexual Difference" (2001), Butler has acknowledged that initially she may have played too fast and loose with gender as performance, at the expense of recognizing certain claims of the physical body and its protection from abuse. She does admit, however, that gender will remain a contentious site, in that gender norms have, and will continue to function in many societies, not simply as regulative, but as fixed and non-negotiable items (Butler 2001: 427).

Butler's political strategy can be compared with that of Uma Narayan, a scholar who is originally from India, but now teaches in the United States. In two publications, *Dislocating Cultures: Identities, Traditions and Third World Feminism* (1997) and "Essence of Culture and a Sense of History" (1998), Narayan discusses the problem of "cultural imperialism" and compares it to "gender essentialism". Introducing yet another understanding of the word "gender", she states: "While gender essentialism often equates the problems, interests, and locations of some socially dominant groups of men and women with those of 'all men' and 'all women', cultural essentialism often equates the values, worldviews and practices of some socially dominant groups with those of 'all members of the culture'" (1998: 88). To counter such cultural and gender essentialism, Narayan suggests a process of both "gender analysis" and "cultural analysis". She reflects on the move within India today by Hindu fundamentalists who want to reclaim an ideal of Hindu womanhood from Vedic times which promotes certain feminine qualities. Narayan describes these ideals as "manufactured" essentialism. Such a false nostalgia, which is the hallmark of fundamentalist religions, has also been criticized by other Indian women scholars, notably by Uma Chakravarti (1989) and Kumkum Roy (1995). What Narayan, Chakravarti and Roy all want to put into question is the way that "gender" is identified by a fundamentalist form of religion with specific cultural attributions or customs that are later advocated as normative – in the sense that they come to represent requisite qualities and behaviour for women. It is as if gender functions as a divinely ordained decree.

Queering religion

In stark contrast to such essentialist constructions, other contemporary scholars have been querying/"queering" gender and its religious imperatives, protesting principally what they consider as obligatory heterosexuality. Marcella Althaus-Reid (2000: 63) clarifies this understanding of the word "queer". She describes it as contesting the present in the name of future possibilities, the full realization of which cannot yet be realized. In his work, *Queering Christ*, Robert Goss (2002) worries about the gendered interpretations that are assumed about Christ's life as well as notions of normative heterosexuality.

Conclusion

All of the scholars surveyed above have contributed, from their diverse disciplines, towards a more complicated and contested understanding of the intricate relations between gender, sexuality and the regulations of social/cultural codes, particularly as enforced by religious mandates. As a consequence, "gender", insofar as it is an integral element of all religion, has been disentangled from its former assumed function as a natural element of sexuality to a recognized means of imposing idealized expectations, if not obligations. As such, "gender", as a simplistic coding can never be taken for granted again. Whether this awareness has led to clarity, or complete compromising of "gender" as a term, is a matter for another discussion. Further refinement is definitely required.

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