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Women's Studies in the History of Religions

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On the most archaic levels of culture, *living as a human being* is in itself a *religious act*, for alimentation, sexual life, and work have a sacramental value. In other words, to be—or rather, to become—a *man* means to be “religious.”

—Mircea Eliade, *A History of Religious Ideas*

To appreciate the radical impact women's studies has had on the discipline of history of religions, it is necessary first to describe briefly how the history of religions understands its task.

The history of religions, which claims to be the objective, scientific study of religion, sets as its task nothing less than the study, in historical and cross-cultural perspective, of *all* human religious phenomena. It includes in its purview, not only sophisticated, literate, philosophical, and theological materials, but also popular expressions of human religiosity such as festivals, life cycle rituals, myths, and practices that are found only in oral traditions. The history of religions seeks to avoid an approach to human religiosity that privileges certain materials as “higher” and others as “lower.” It assumes that all expressions of human religiosity are worthy of study. In the words of Mircea Eliade: “For the historian of religions, *every* manifestation of the sacred is important: every rite, every myth, every belief or divine figure reflects the experience of the sacred and hence implies the notions of *being*, of *meaning*, and of *truth*.”¹

History of religions does not seek to evaluate one religion (or religious expression) vis-à-vis another with a view to declaring one superior to the other. It is comparative in nature at times, as when particular patterns or themes are traced in cross-cultural context, but it does not seek by means of this approach to privilege certain traditions or types of spirituality as superior to others. Its

aim is to appreciate the religious nature of humankind by means of studying all religious phenomena objectively.

History of religions acknowledges that there are elite and popular forms of religion in many traditions, and that within many traditions there is criticism of (even disdain for) certain “popular” religious beliefs and customs on the part of elites, but history of religions is interested equally in elite and “popular” religion. It seeks to gain a complete picture of any given religious tradition, or any given religious situation, by viewing all expressions of religiosity.

Although history of religions (*Religionswissenschaft*) as practiced and founded by van der Leeuw, Wach, Kitagawa, Eliade, Long, and other scholars arose in the Western intellectual tradition, there was a self-conscious attempt in the discipline to avoid parochialism or to privilege Western religious traditions. This included avoiding making judgments on the truth claims of religious traditions being studied in order to fully appreciate the intrinsic value of all human religious expressions. In this respect, history of religions thought of itself as liberal, all-inclusive, and objective in its study of religion.

For Eliade, Kitagawa, Long, and others, one of the principal aims of the history of religions was to discover underlying types, models, themes, and structures in the overwhelming mass of religious data—to discover and articulate a religious grammar or syntax that was cross-culturally informed. In this quest, history of religions thought of itself as rigorously nonparochial, scientific, and neutral and sought to dissociate itself from any one tradition, point of view, or claim to truth. It distinguished itself from Christian theology and church history.

During the formative years of the history of religions in Europe and America, its claims to be completely objective and all-inclusive in its study of human religiosity, to be the first systematic attempt to study religion sympathetically and objectively, were heady stuff. Under the leadership of Eliade and the Chicago school, a number of scholars set about the task of creating a “new humanism” in the West, an enlightened outlook that was based on a nonparochial, unbiased, all-inclusive, and sympathetic study of human religiousness.² The hope was strong that the history of religions could infuse the West with a new vision of the human spirit based on a more open, catholic, and sympathetic study of non-Western religious materials.

Women’s studies has had a devastating effect on many of the underlying claims of the history of religions. In general, the effect of women’s studies on history of religions has not been to cast doubt on the intent of the discipline. Rather, the effect has been to show, often in shocking and dramatic ways, the extent to which history of religions has not been true to its own mandate. It has been neither all-inclusive nor objective in its study of human religiousness.

History of Religions as the Study of Men's Religion

The task of including all expressions of religiosity in the purview of the history of religions, of course, is not easy. The extent to which it has failed to do so has been made embarrassingly clear by women's studies. Despite its claim to include all religious phenomena within its scope, the history of religions, like all other humanistic disciplines, in fact had a quite limited focus. What it claimed to be the religions or religious expressions of humankind were often (indeed, usually) the religions and religious expressions of males. Prior to the advent of women's studies, the history of religions was primarily the study of men's religion.

What is particularly embarrassing is that historians of religions seemed completely unaware of this state of affairs. They assumed that men's religion was synonymous with human religion. Scholarly studies of initiation were often limited to male initiation. Studies of deities were often limited to male deities, or would include a special section on "goddesses" (as if all goddesses were of one type or were a particular type of the wider, more generic category of "god" or "deity"). Studies of a culture or religious tradition would often include (usually near the end) a section on "women." More often than not, these brief sections on women or goddesses were based on male views of women or goddesses. They were discussed primarily, if not exclusively, as adjuncts to males, according to their relationships with males: as mothers, wives, consorts, daughters, and sisters. Women were the "other"; they were objectified and spoken about from the male point of view.

The classic statement on this great lack in the history of religions was made by Rita Gross, a historian of religions and herself a student of Eliade and the Chicago school, in her article "Androcentrism and Androgyny in the Methodology of History of Religions." There she wrote:

The unconscious androcentric presuppositions undergirding almost all work done to date in the history of religions cause serious deficiencies, especially at the primary level of data-perception and gathering, and this deficiency in turn generates serious deficiencies at the level of model-building and theorizing whenever any hint of sexuality or sexual imagery is present in the data being analyzed.³

From the androcentric point of view that dominated history of religions prior to women's studies, it is claimed either (a) that women are included under the generic male, and thus no special consideration need be given them, or (b) that women are other, in which case, to cite Gross again:

[T]hey are discussed as an object exterior to mankind, needing to be explained and fitted into one's worldview, having the same ontological and epistemological status as trees, unicorns, deities or any other

object that must be discussed to make experience intelligible. They are there in the world, but they are discussed as an “other” to the human Subject attempting to understand his world (generic masculine deliberate), as the problem to be solved, not as a Co-Subject in a mutual attempt to understand human sexual differentiation and all its manifestations.⁴

Women’s Religion is Different from Men’s Religion

Not only did women’s studies demonstrate to historians of religions that their studies were concerned almost entirely with men’s religion, it demonstrated also that women’s religion was often different from men’s religion. Incorporating materials on women’s religious practices and beliefs often resulted not so much in elaborations of previously stated generalizations about a given tradition as in subversion of such generalizations. Once historians of religions began to study women’s religion with opened eyes they began to see, for example, that Hinduism for a male can be, and usually is, quite different from Hinduism for a woman. They began to appreciate that there are often quite distinct male and female subcultures within the larger culture, and that these gendered cultures are far more defining of individual character and religious expression than the shared aspects of the wider culture and religion. One scholar, speaking of Hinduism as practiced in North India, for example, has said that gender is the “most pervasive factor” in determining which religious group one belongs to, which social and religious activities one participates in, and how one understands the mythology and theology of Hindu culture.⁵

Even in the case of males and females who participate in the same religious community, or the same cultic tradition, it has become evident that religious experience can be quite different. An interesting case in point concerns the religious poetry of two sixteenth-century North Indian devotees of Krishna, one male, Sūrdās, and one female, Mīrābāī. In a comparison of their writings, it is clear that the two relate to Krishna in differing ways and use different metaphors to express their love. A dominating metaphor in Mīrā’s songs is her marriage to Lord Krishna. In the songs of Sūrdās, this image is lacking, although he imagines himself to be a woman in love with Krishna. Mīrā is “at home” with the images, nuances, and particulars of the married women and uses this metaphor to describe her relationship with the Lord. Sūrdās is only comfortable with a romantic, illicit, relationship, which is the subject of most Sanskrit poetry.⁶

A similar case concerns the early religious poetry of Indian Buddhist monks and nuns. Hymns of the monks (*Theragāthā*) and nuns (*Therīgāthā*) were preserved in separate collections. Although there are numerous stylistic and formulaic similarities between the two collections, a study of the hymns

shows significant differences that were probably due to gender. In the hymns of the nuns, for example, we find much more attention given to relationships. They mention their previous roles as mothers and daughters, they mention friends in the monastic order, and they discuss rivalries with other monastics. The hymns of the nuns are also much more inclined to discuss overt conflict, which probably reflects the fact that women had a more difficult time leading the monastic life due to prejudices against them at the time.⁷

The Materials Being Studied Are Created by and for Males

Women's studies also made embarrassingly apparent the great extent to which almost every culture (literate and nonliterate) is (or was) patriarchal, sexist, androcentric, and often misogynist. The problem is particularly acute in the study of texts. In most cultures (until very recently) it was primarily or exclusively males who were literate. It was the men who wrote texts, studied texts, commented on texts, and invoked texts in a variety of social situations. In some cases (for example, Hinduism) women were forbidden even to hear certain religious texts. In these texts, the primary concerns are male concerns. Women are routinely regarded as "other" and are dealt with primarily as they relate to males. Women's religion in these texts is described (if it is mentioned at all) from an outsider's point of view and is usually regarded as in some way inferior to male practice and belief. Male religious practices are regarded as prestigious and powerful, women's as lowly, crude, and relatively ineffective.

A good example of this is the recitation of the *Devī-Māhātmya*, a Hindu text in Sanskrit in praise of the goddess Durgā, at the Vindhyaśāsinī temple near Mirzapur in North India. The text is recited by a variety of people there throughout the year, and on certain festival days thousands of devotees come to recite the text. Most of those who recite the text are males, and the few females who do recite the text usually do so in a vernacular language, as they do not know how to read or pronounce Sanskrit. According to the professional male reciters of the text, the recitation of the text in Hindi (or another vernacular language) does have merit, but is much less meritorious than chanting the text in the original Sanskrit. Both recitations are water, they say, but Sanskrit recitation is like Ganges water compared to the tap water of Hindi. Or Sanskrit recitation is like fresh milk, Hindi recitation like powdered milk. Sanskrit recitation of the text is like pure *ghee* (clarified butter); Hindi recitation is like Dalda (a cheap cooking oil).⁸

Prior to the advent of women's studies, the androcentric nature of many of the materials studied by historians of religions was barely noticed, and if it was, deserved little comment. The implication was that the recitation of the *Devī-Māhātmya* in Hindi, by women, was indeed less potent, religiously uplifting, and spiritually prestigious than the recitation of the text in Sanskrit by males.

Materials on Women's Religion Are Sparse or Entirely Lacking in Some Cases

Women's studies has also made clear the extent to which materials dealing with women's religion are meager or entirely lacking in some traditions. The literary records of most religious traditions are the sole source of our knowledge about them yet the texts tell us very little (sometimes nothing) about women's religious practices. It is next to impossible to reconstruct women's religious worlds on the bases of these materials. The historical record, which is so often controlled entirely by males, is sometimes silent on women. Prior to women's studies, historians of religions barely noticed this fact and would blithely generalize about the religion of the Sumerians, Hindus, Chinese, or Egyptians on the basis of descriptions of male religion. Women's religion was relegated to a few offhand remarks about what "the Hindus allow women to do, or not to do." Men's attitudes to women in ancient literary sources (typically androcentric) were the sole basis for reflections on women's religion. Women's studies has made clear the great extent to which women's voices have been silenced in the course of history, how their words have gone unspoken, and how, in many cases, they have been irretrievably lost to us. To the historian of religions this means that our descriptions of religious traditions are often incomplete and heavily biased in favor of male religion.

Materials on Women Had Been Ignored

In those religions and traditions where materials on women do exist, it was a matter of these materials having been neglected as worthy of study by historians of religion. In the late 1960s and 1970s, when an interest in women's religion began to flourish, there was a paucity of scholarly work on the subject. Those of us who taught courses on women and religion at this time had to struggle to find relevant books and articles. It was startlingly clear that women's religion had not been studied, that it was an entirely new field. The title of the book edited by Nancy Auer Falk and Rita Gross, *Unspoken Worlds: Women's Religious Lives in Non-Western Cultures* (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1980), summed up the problem. There was rich material in many traditions, but it had been ignored; it had not become the subject of history of religions.

The discovery of women's religion (it was nothing less than a discovery) unleashed an incredible effort, mostly but not entirely by women scholars, to find and reflect upon women's religion. Now, some twenty-five years later, we have an immense body of detailed data on women's religions in many traditions. A cursory look at materials being published by scholarly journals in religious studies, scholarly presses dealing with religion, the program for the

Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion, and the programs for other conferences dealing with religion indicates the immense amount of work now being done on women's religion. In all areas—biblical studies, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, native, South Asian, and East Asian religions, contemporary new religious movements, and so on—there is intense, sophisticated and productive scholarship underway that is creating a huge amount of material on women's religion from all over the world and throughout much of recorded history. This has radically changed the face of religious studies in general and the history of religions in particular. We now have detailed studies of individual religious heroines,⁹ women's religious cults,¹⁰ and women's religious rites and rituals.¹¹

It is not an exaggeration to say that this effort has given a depth of focus to history of religions that it entirely lacked prior to the advent of women's studies. In light of the vast amounts of materials that have been made available on women's religion in just twenty-five years, it is incredible to remember that history of religions almost entirely ignored this material prior to women's studies.

Religious Materials Are Heavily Gendered

Women's studies has taught history of religions that the data it investigates are often heavily gendered. It used to seem unproblematic to analyze, interpret, and then generalize to an entire culture about a particular myth, ritual, symbol, or theological system. The difficulties were usually described in terms of the mastery of languages, the complexity and nuance of symbolic structures, and the social or cultural setting of the materials in question. These difficulties, of course, remain. Women's studies, however, has added to the historian of religion's task the crucial aspect of cultural gendering. Historians of religion are now aware of the fact that a particular symbol, ritual, myth, or belief may be thought about in one way by males and another way by females. It is clear in many cases that it is simply not accurate to suppose that the meaning of a particular religious text, event, or symbol is the same for males and females.

A particularly vivid example of the gendered nature of the material that historians of religions study is the case of the goddess T'ien Hou (also known as Ma Tsu), who is widely worshipped along the South China coast. Among males, T'ien Hou is primarily a symbol of pacification and social order. Her cult was encouraged during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries by the state as part of a pacification program aimed at pirates and certain boat peoples dwelling along the South China coast. Stories about T'ien Hou in literary sources emphasize her defeat of socially disruptive elements such as pirates. The cult of T'ien Hou also became strongly associated with the protection of male lineages and the social hierarchy. Government officials promoted and attended

her festivals. For males, she is primarily an establishment deity, a guardian of the status quo.

The way women relate to T'ien Hou is entirely different. They take no part whatsoever in the public cult of the goddess and usually do not know anything of her mythology as contained in literary sources. They relate to her individually, and the stories they know of her are primarily from local oral traditions. They bring her offerings on behalf of their families and ask favors from her. They address her as T'ien Hou Niang Niang, the suffix lending her a maternal or grandmotherly character. As a maternal confidant, T'ien Hou is especially approached for children and the protection and enrichment of the household.¹²

Another example of how religious symbols are understood quite differently by females and males concerns the nine Durgās. In Varanasi there is a group of goddesses known as the nine Durgās, each of whom has a temple. In texts, these goddesses are always listed in the same sequence: Śailaputrī, Brahmācāriṇī, Candraghaṅṭā, Kuṣmāṅḍā, Skandamātā, Kātyāyanī, Kālarātrī, Mahāgaurī, and Siddhidātrī. In his research on Durgā worship in Varanasi, Hillary Rodrigues asked both males and females how they understood these goddesses and what lent the group internal coherence. Males, for the most part, stressed the fact that all were manifestations of Durgā or the Mahādevī, that they represented her different manifestations in the world. When pressed, some males interpreted the nine goddesses as different stages in the evolution of *prakṛti* (the physical creation) or as different elements in it. Śailaputrī, for example, represents unrefined matter, Brahmācāriṇī represents the active principle in water (that which intensifies or thickens water to become semen, for example), Candraghaṅṭā is the active principle within fire, Kuṣmāṅḍā is identified with the element of air, and Skandamātā represents ether (*ākāśa*). Kātyāyanī represents the heart or mind and is the principle of intellect (*buddhi*). Kālarātrī is the element of time and manifests herself as ignorance (*avidyā*). Mahāgaurī lends knowledge to the world and is identified with consciousness (*cit*). Finally, Siddhidātrī is the aspect of ego (*ahamkāra*), as well as the principle of the self (*ātman*).

Interpretations of the nine Durgās by women differed dramatically from this rather philosophical view of the goddesses. According to certain females, the nine Durgās represent the stages in a woman's life; as one woman put it: "These nine Durgās are our life, women's life."¹³ In what we might term a view of the goddesses as expressions of the female life cycle, Śailaputrī (daughter of the mountain) represents the newborn female, who is fresh and pure like the snows of the mountains. Brahmācāriṇī is a young girl who has reached puberty but has not yet menstruated. Candraghaṅṭā is the young girl who has begun to menstruate (*ghaṅṭā* means bell but can also mean a period of time in Hindi, so her name may mean "she who has periods, cycles, or phases").

Kuṣmāṇḍā is the fertile, pregnant woman who is large bellied like the pumpkin gourd (which is what her name refers to). Skandamātā (mother of Skanda) is the mother who has just given birth and sustains her young. Kātyāyanī (a name sometimes used to refer to widows) is a middle-aged widow who still looks after her children and is independent and strong. Kālarātrī (dark night) is a woman entering menopause, the dark night (or death) of her fertile powers. Mahāgaurī (great pure one) is a postmenopausal woman who has returned to the purity of a virgin (*gaurī*); she engages in ascetic or spiritual pursuits such as pilgrimage and is no longer troubled by menstrual “pollution,” which is ritually prohibiting. Finally, Siddhidātrī (she who bestows attainments or perfections) is the woman who has achieved spiritual perfection and is capable of giving perfection to others.¹⁴

Historians of religions, when presented with data such as this, are tempted to prefer one interpretation over another as more coherent, satisfying, and compelling (and in this particular case, I personally am strongly inclined to the interpretation given by women). The first point I wish to make with reference to the nine Durgās, however, is how males and females find different meanings in the same set of symbols and how the different meanings can enrich our understanding of religious materials. To fully appreciate the meaning and power of symbols it is often necessary to actively seek out female and male views.

Given the gendered nature of symbols and culture generally, a more careful way of putting the matter would be to say that some symbols (or symbol sets) primarily or basically express women’s experience and that when males seek to interpret them, they misinterpret them, completely failing to understand their essential meanings. Although I am not willing to say this in respect to the nine Durgās, it is a possibility that the historian of religions should keep in mind when trying to appreciate the extent to which religious data is strongly gendered.

The Hermeneutics of Suspicion

Women’s studies has taught historians of religion to approach their materials with what has been termed a “hermeneutics of suspicion.”¹⁵ That is, women’s studies has made clear both the biased nature of many religious materials and the biases of many historians of religion. Women’s studies has taught history of religions to be suspicious of sources or scholars that condemn, belittle, or ignore women and to look harder and more critically at religious materials with a view to discovering women’s religious worlds. Women’s studies has made it difficult, indeed, impossible, to rest content with the conclusion that women’s religious lives were either the same as men’s or of no interest simply because materials written by males (whether primary or scholarly sources) do

not mention women or relegate them to a secondary, “other” role. The hermeneutics of suspicion has taught the historian of religions to be cautious when reading (or writing) about “the ideal Hindu woman.” Too often in the past (and in the present) historians of religions have uncritically accepted an androcentric view of women as an objective description of their values, lives, and outlooks. The view found in many Hindu writings that a woman should devote her entire life to serving her husband (the ideal of the *pativrata*), even if he is a contemptible lout, does actually describe the lives of many Hindu women. The hermeneutics of suspicion, however, asks whose view this is and whose interests are being served by idealizing women this way. It is suspicious of descriptions of women that patently serve male interests. The hermeneutics of suspicion seeks to look beyond or behind androcentric biases in both primary and scholarly sources in order to discover women’s own voices, which often dissent from male stereotypes of women.

Engaged Scholarship

Women’s studies has also placed a good deal of emphasis on the fact that all scholarship is subjective to some extent. It has raised doubts concerning the possibility (and the desirability) of totally disinterested, objective, detached scholarship. Many in women’s studies have said that all scholarship has an agenda and that it is best to be aware of what it is. In the case of many of those in women’s studies, the agenda concerns undertaking scholarship that will alleviate the oppression of women in one way or another. It is aimed at increasing the scholarly awareness of women and the androcentric nature of most past, and much present, scholarship. The aim is to undertake engaged scholarship¹⁶—scholarship that is aware of its agenda and pursues it with passion.

In the case of history of religions, this has meant soul searching, as it claims to be objective and scientific. In its origins it sought to disassociate itself from any theological or cultural bias or viewpoint. How successful it has been in this respect is a matter of debate. It is clear, however, that in history of religions, as in other disciplines, there are certain paradigms, preferences, and predilections that dominate its scholarship. These are rarely consciously acknowledged by those in the field and often must be pointed out by critics.¹⁷ Women’s studies has challenged history of religions to look more carefully at its underlying paradigms. It has also invited historians of religions to be more forthright in undertaking their research as part of a wider theological, social, political, moral, or economic agenda. It has invited historians of religions to make value judgments concerning what we might term good and bad religion, for example.

Goddess Religion

Women's studies has also generated a greater interest among historians of religions in goddess religion. Twenty-five years ago there was little research being conducted on goddesses. This is in striking contrast to the present, when many scholars are actively engaged in research on goddess worship and mythology. In Hinduism, for example, recent major scholarly works on goddesses include: Douglas Renfrew Brooks, *Auspicious Wisdom: The Texts and Traditions of Śrīvidyā Śākta Tantrism in South India* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992); C. Mackenzie Brown, *The Triumph of the Goddess: The Canonical Model and Theological Visions of the Devī-Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990); Thomas Coburn, *Encountering the Goddess: A Translation of the Devī-Māhātmya and a Study of its Interpretation* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991); Kathleen Erndl, *Victory to the Mother: The Hindu Goddess of Northwest India in Myth, Ritual, and Symbol* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Alf Hiltebeitel, *The Cult of Draupadī*, 2 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988); Cynthia Ann Humes, "The Text and Temple of the Great Goddess: The *Devī-Māhātmya* and the Vindhyācal Temple of Mirzapur" (Ph.D. diss., University of Iowa, 1990); Stanley Kurtz, *All the Mothers Are One: Hindu India and the Cultural Reshaping of Psychoanalysis* (1992); Rachel Fell McDermott, "Evidence for the Transformation of the Goddess Kālī: Kamalākānta Bhaṭṭācārya and the Bengali Śākta Padāvalī Tradition" (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1993); Hillary Peter Rodrigues, "The Image of the Goddess Durgā and Her Worship in Banaras" (Ph.D. diss., McMaster University, 1993); and William S. Sax, *Mountain Goddess: Gender and Politics in a Himalayan Pilgrimage* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991). During the past twenty-five years, a large and detailed body of scholarship has been produced that gives us a rich, complex, refined picture of goddess worship in many parts of India and a clear analysis of Hindu goddess mythology.

Interest among historians of religions in goddess religion can be related to the influence of women's studies in two ways. First, because of women's studies, more women have become interested in history of religions. Women's studies has encouraged more women to pursue the academic life, which used to be completely dominated by men (the situation in history of religions was no different from any other field). Many of these women historians of religions have shown interest in goddess religion as part of a wider interest in female symbolism. Second, within women's studies itself, there has developed an intense interest in goddess religion in prehistory, which is believed to be part of a nonpatriarchal, matrilineal culture predating patriarchy. By focusing

scholarly attention on goddess religion, women's studies has sparked an interest in goddess religion among historians of religions, both female and male.

Androgyny in the History of Religions

Rita Gross, as early as 1977, called for what she termed an *androgynous outlook* as a necessary preliminary to methodology in the history of religions.¹⁸ The androgynous perspective involves acknowledging that any model for humanity must contain both female and male. It subverts the tendency of androcentric scholarship to "collapse the male norm and the human norm,"¹⁹ to exclude the female altogether or to relegate the female to the status of object. Instead of studying women as adjuncts to males, or women's religion as a deviation, approximation, or curious expression of normative male religion, the androgynous approach affirms that female and male religion and spirituality are often separate and parallel. Much of male religion, as we know all too well on the basis of androcentric data and androcentric scholarship, excludes women. What is also obvious, however, is that much female religion excludes male participation. The task of the historian of religions is no longer to study women's religion as a reflection of male religion but to study women's religion in its own right, as a phenomenon that makes sense in its own terms.

Problems

Women's studies, particularly insofar as it is informed by feminist analysis and principles, poses certain difficult problems for history of religions. In much feminist analysis, human culture is perceived to be unrelievedly patriarchal, androcentric, and usually misogynist. In this analysis males are invariably the victimizers and women the victims. Women live under the shadow of male oppression and are not allowed to lead their own lives. Surely there are many examples of male oppression of women. But does it help the historian of religions in interpreting her data to operate with the view that this situation is universal and omnipresent? Is this the place to begin? It seems to me that this position is often reductionistic.

Categorizing males as oppressors and women as victims can also lead to objectifying women as a category and blinding the historian of religions to women's own voices, keeping him or her from hearing women as subjects. This has become clear in conversations between Western feminists and women in non-Western cultures concerning certain religious-cultural practices, such as clitoridectomy or Muslim women wearing the *hijab*. The temptation for Western feminists, indeed Western scholars in general, is to condemn such practices as oppressive of women and illustrative of patriarchal values. When women who practice these customs defend them, they are considered to have

been brainwashed by the patriarchy. That is, they are objectified and characterized as victims. It is not easy, in my opinion, to know where the truth lies in many of these cases. It seems important to me, however, to allow the women who seek to defend these practices as significant in their own religious lives to speak to us as historians of religions.²⁰ The tension that sometimes exists between Western and non-Western women concerning some of these practices may suggest that Western analysis and categories sometimes tend to objectify and generalize unfairly.

A continuing problem for history of religions is the extent to which such data is unavailable for study. It is unavailable precisely because of the centrality of gender in most cultures. Part of the problem in the early history of the history of religions, when nearly all historians of religions were male, was that women's religious lives were often hidden, often deliberately hidden, from male investigators. That this problem was exacerbated by scholarly androcentrism and a general disinterest on the part of males in women's religion, goes without saying. But the problem remains, quite apart from scholarly androcentrism. Put simply: women scholars are often not welcome to study certain aspects of male religion, and male scholars are not welcome to study certain aspects of women's religion. In the end, perhaps, the only realistic conclusion is for historians of religions to accept this situation and to recognize that in many cases we can only perceive a partial picture of the whole which must be completed by colleagues of the opposite sex.

Conclusion

It is no longer possible for historians of religions to focus exclusively, or even primarily, on men's religion. Our classrooms are filled with students, both women and men, who are now quick to ask: "What about women?" Women's studies has woken up the academy to the scandal of androcentric scholarship and the androcentrism implicit in many of the materials historians of religions study. This has greatly broadened the field of history of religions, expanding its interests into areas once ignored or neglected. Historians of religions, now well aware of the extent to which males have dominated literary sources, and also the extent to which males insist on speaking for women, are inclined to go directly to women themselves to study how they live out their religion. Historians of religions are now less inclined to generalize about all people in a tradition on the basis of literary sources alone. There is a growing interest and respect for oral tradition, in-depth interviews with women, and what was often called, somewhat disdainfully, "popular religion," which often meant religious practices and beliefs of women. Women's studies has chastened history of religions, and the discipline is much the better for it.

Notes

1. Eliade, *A History of Religious Ideas*, v. 1: *From the Stone Age to the Eleusinian Mysteries* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), xiii.

2. To a great extent this meant, in practice, the study of Asian and “native” traditions. In the Chicago school there was a strong emphasis (to a great extent because of Eliade’s own background) on South Asian and native materials, and a fairly strong bias against the biblical traditions (Judaism and Christianity) and Islam. China also tended to take second place to the religions native to India and nonliterate cultures.

3. Rita Gross, “Androcentrism and Androgyny in the Methodology of History of Religions,” in *Beyond Androcentrism: New Essays on Women and Religion*, ed. Rita Gross (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1977), 7.

4. *Ibid.*, 10.

5. Susan Wadley, *Shakti: Power in the Conceptual Structure of Karimpur Religion* (Chicago: Department of Anthropology, University of Chicago, 1975), 37.

6. See John Stratton Hawley, “Images of Gender in the Poetry of Krishna,” in *Gender and Religion: On the Complexity of Symbols*, ed. Caroline Walker Bynum, Stevan Harrell, and Paula Richman (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), 231–256.

7. See Kathryn Rennie, “The Struggle for Liberation in the Therīgāthā,” MA thesis, MacMaster University, 1990, 123–124.

8. Cynthia Ann Humes, “The Text and Temple of the Great Goddess: The *Devī-Māhātmya* and the Vindhyācal Temple of Mirzapur,” Ph.D. diss., University of Iowa, 1990, 517.

9. For example, Barbara Newman, *Sister of Wisdom: St. Hildegard’s Theology of the Feminine* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

10. For example, the Zar cult of North Africa: Janice Boddy, *Wombs and Alien Spirits: Women, Men, and the Zar Cult in Northern Sudan* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989).

11. Some recent works in Hinduism include: Mary McGee, “Feasting and Fasting: The Vrata Tradition and its Significance for Hindu Women,” Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1987; Anne M. Pearson, “‘Because it Gives me Peace of Mind’: Functions and Meanings of *Vrats* in the Religious Lives of Hindu Women in Banaras,” Ph.D. diss., McMaster University, 1992; and several articles in Julia Leslie (ed.), *Roles and Rituals for Hindu Women* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1992).

12. James L. Watson, “Standardizing the Gods: The Promotion of T’ien Hou (‘Empress of Heaven’) along the South China Coast, 960–1960,” in *Popular Culture in Late Imperial China*, ed. David Johnson, Andrew J. Nathan, and Evelyn S. Rawski (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 292–324.

13. Hillary Peter Rodrigues, "The Image of the Goddess Durgā and Her Worship in Banāras," Ph.D. diss., McMaster University, 1993, 257.

14. *Ibid.*, 236–260.

15. As far as I know, the first person to use this term in reference to feminist scholarship was Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 56.

16. This term is used by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza in speaking of feminist biblical scholarship (*Bread Not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation* [Boston: Beacon Press, 1984], 46). She also uses such terms as *advocacy scholarship* and *evaluative scholarship* (*ibid.*, 43, 66, 84–92).

17. See, for example, Gregory Schopen, "Archaeology and Protestant Presuppositions in the Study of Indian Buddhism," *History of Religions* 31, no. 1 (August, 1991): 1–23, and Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).

18. "Androcentrism and Androgyny in the Methodology of History of Religions," in *Beyond Androcentrism: New Essays on Women and Religion*, ed. Rita Gross (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1977), 7–22.

19. *Ibid.*, 13.

20. I am grateful to Philippa Carter for raising these issues in response to my request to reflect on the interaction between women's studies and history of religions.