Intersection of Women’s Studies with Religious Studies

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Abstract

By the end of the twentieth century, some striking parallels can be seen in the academic disciplines of women’s studies and religious studies. This paper will explore some of these parallels as well as some of the difficulties that face the intersection of these two fields. This exploration will be done by comparing research and teaching methods through the reading of scholarly works by leaders in both fields. The paper will look at the methodologies used by women’s studies scholars for the traditionally male-dominated field of religious studies. These reformers think that it is necessary to ask new questions, collect new data, offer new analyses, and develop new theories to do justice to the voices of women. What might these new ways of gathering and interpreting information mean for academic research in the twenty-first century?
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Until recently, religious doctrine has been written by the “winners” at various conferences and even in conflicts. Since the middle of the twentieth century, groups that have been oppressed by gender or by colonization have been speaking out to share their experiences, both good and oppressive, with theologians around the world.

By the end of the twentieth century, some striking parallels have become apparent in the academic disciplines of women’s studies and religious studies. This paper will explore some of these parallels as well as some of the difficulties that face the intersection of these two fields. This exploration will be done by comparing research and teaching methods of leaders in both fields. The paper will also look at the implications of the discipline of women’s studies for the research methodologies of women who are working in the traditionally male-dominated field of religious studies.

While using the term religious studies, this paper will focus mainly on the Christian tradition because that is the area with which the author is familiar. However, there are definite possibilities for additional studies of women’s experiences relative to other world religions.

This paper will also focus on the academic discipline of women’s studies. I will use the title “women’s studies” as opposed to gender studies or feminist studies. Scholars in the field of women’s studies are defined as “academic reformers who think that it is necessary to ask new questions, collect new data, offer new analyses and revise or develop new theories to do justice to their findings” (Lee, 2004, p. 290). The women’s studies programs being compared have no political agenda. Their aim is to study women as thoroughly and critically as men have been studied for centuries.

Many of the “academic reformers” in these two areas of study believe that it is necessary to ask new questions, collect new data, offer new analyses, and develop new theories to do justice to their findings. What might these new ways of gathering information mean for the fields of women’s studies and religious studies within the academic community in the twenty-first century?

Statement of Problem

It was the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries before women gained the opportunity to enroll in colleges and universities in significant numbers. The few women who were admitted to colleges in the eighteenth century were not permitted to engage in debate with men or among themselves. They were not permitted to present
their work in class or participate in class discussions. In 1837, Lucy Stone attended Oberlin College and “when she had fulfilled the requirements to graduate, she learned that she could write her own commencement address, but could not deliver it” (Van Leeuwen, 1993, 358).

Women did not enroll in any measurable number in theological schools until the early 1970’s. The women’s movement in the churches affected and was affected by the movement for change in the situation of women in society. Women’s studies in various academic disciplines began in the United States in the late 1960’s.

The social change that led to much of the increased enrollment in religious studies programs in the mid to late 1970’s was the decisions by several mainline Protestant denominations to allow the ordination of women. The number of women enrolled in theological studies increased with the ordination of women beginning in the years between 1956 (Methodists and Presbyterians) to 1976 (Episcopalian). (Ruether, 2002, p. 181). By the start of the twenty-first century, women who enrolled in theological seminaries were present in equal numbers with men. “In more progressive schools, women make up nearly two-thirds of the student body. Women are also becoming well represented on the faculties in seminaries, as well as in religious departments of many universities”. (Ruether, 2010, p. 18).

Along with the admission of women to theological seminaries, there came a call for a new way of looking at the study of religion. As more women engaged in the study of theology, they were unwilling to tolerate the dominant male theological language that tended to inferiorize women. One of the first things to be questioned was the exclusively male language used in reference to God. The existence of female scholars and the critical transformation of their consciousness meant that their research challenged “the existing paradigms of religious studies because all phenomena are examined from the perspectives of gender and power” (King, 1995, p. 2). They began to question how it is that we come to know what we know and how we come to believe what we believe.

As women began to question the status quo in their study of religion, there was a backlash from conservative churches which have gone so far as to denounce feminism as heresy. These conservatives claim that male language for God is unchangeable while feminine imagery for God is “paganism.” Change on the part of some has come with reluctance, although change has begun to come to many of the mainline denominations. There is little doubt that the perspective of gender is of increasing importance in theological studies for male scholars as well as female scholars.
The first feminist critiques of religion emerged from women’s attempts to locate themselves within their own tradition. Part of the problem was that not only were the questions that were being asked different, they were being asked by persons “whom scholarship had long designated as inherently limited in capacity for rational thought” (Warne, 1989, p. 35). An interesting observation is that much of the research done by women in the early years of feminist theology was done by women from Roman Catholic backgrounds for whom ordination is not an option and whose voices have been silenced for centuries by the threat of excommunication.

Why Women’s Studies and Feminist Theology?

The goals of women’s studies programs were formulated early and have guided the development of programs over the last several decades. Among these goals was the development of a body of research about women that would allow scholars to begin to envision the lost history and culture of women and to eventually change the mainstream curriculum in liberal arts education (Carr, 1988, p. 65). Half of the people who have ever lived either have no recorded history just because of their gender, or they have been placed in background roles in their history.

Contained in the category of gender is the mistaken assumption that there is an underlying experience that all people share regardless of race, class, or ethnicity. Along with the undisputed matter of physical differences between the sexes, during the period of the Enlightenment in the Western world, masculinity came to represent reason and intelligence while femininity represented passions and emotions. This stereotype continues in the minds of many people today. While human values and traits have been polarized into masculine and feminine, our culture has not yet developed a concept of a “real” human being (King, 1995, p. 9). Sex is a biological given while gender is a social acquisition. Gender refers to the social, cultural, psychological, or religious meanings that are attributed to sex.

We continue to seek a new, more differentiated and more inclusive definition of what it means to be human. One of the areas that continue to be debated is the role of language in shaping the definition of human. When masculine perspectives defines words like “human” and “person” to be implied in the use of “man” women are automatically assumed to be included. Unfortunately, women do not perceive themselves as included in the language that they are hearing or reading. Studies have shown that readers will impute maleness to “he” and recognize the potential for femaleness only when the word used is sexually neutral, for example using police officer instead of policeman.
There are parallels in the study of the subject matter and the questions that are asked by both women’s studies and religious studies programs which should work to make them “natural allies in the academy.” Some of the similarities in these programs are that both were originally created to correct an imbalance in the research that was being done in which women were being ignored and that both make claims to “a kind of ultimacy in revealing something about human nature” (Lee, 2004, p. 387). Both fields of study also lend themselves to an interdisciplinary relationship with other fields within the social sciences.

There are also some antipathies that arise between the two areas of study. These include the idea that, according to some scholars in the area of women’s studies, religions have traditionally exacerbated patriarchal dominance and should be disregarded all together. Also, many women have had negative personal experiences with religion, often due to the oppressive nature of their own experiences of church. A third antipathy arises through the rooting of early feminist theory in Marxist theory, which has historically held a negative view of religion. Finally, white males have traditionally dominated religious studies and theology has been written from their world view. The current scholars in the field of women’s studies are willing to call this androcentric bias into question.

Early women’s studies sought a move toward an androgenous ethos which tried to persuade women to adopt masculine ways of behaving in the academic arena in order to succeed. Many women objected to this attempt to require women to become “more masculine” in order to be taken seriously in the workplace. By the 1980’s, however, feminists argued that the differences between the genders should not be erased. Women should embrace their differences and the unique perspectives brought to academia by their experiences. The assumed power differential and resulting oppression is what needs to be addressed, not the differences themselves.

Women’s work in the social sciences provides a background that allows female theologians to define more clearly what patriarchy means as a socioeconomic and legal system in different historical periods, for example in first century Rome. These female theologians have searched biblical and historical traditions to locate more inclusive, feminine images of God and they have looked at the descriptions of women apostles in the Gospels including Mary Magdalene, and Mary and Martha of Bethany, among others. They have attempted to reconstruct basic symbols of the Christian faith to be more inclusive of the experiences of women, for example the gendering of God as male. Women have had a place in the Christian church from the beginning, but their contributions have gone unrecognized or have been ignored.
Methodology

Feminist theology makes use of a range of feminist methodologies developed in women’s studies which focus on literary, hermeneutical, and philosophical methods. The field of women’s studies tries to shift the academic paradigm by asking new questions of traditional scholarly materials. These are questions that take women’s experience and perspective seriously. A new perspective can result in a redefinition of the original problem.

Feminist theology starts with the recognition that Christian theology has been created mainly from a male elite experience, including a monopoly on the teaching in seminaries and on pastoral ministry. The first step for the early scholars in both feminist theology and women’s studies was to demonstrate that women had been discriminated against and that the result of this discrimination had detrimental effects for scholarship as well as for the lives of women. Christian scripture has been misused to preserve power. One example is the use of Genesis 1 – 3. Authors have used the creation story to paint women as less than men intellectually, physically, and morally. This attitude is found in the writings of the early church fathers including Jerome, Augustine and John of Chrysostom.

In the Christian churches, women were trying to discover where they belonged in the life of the church that was so important in their lives and in which they were deciding to raise their children. Those studying these women analyzed and critiqued the traditions that led to the sexism and androcentrism found in religious history and traditions. According to Carr (1988), “There was a three-layered ideology : views of women as property or objects, as dangerously sexual and carnal, and romanticized as morally and spiritually superior” (p. 84).

Once the need for recognition of women’s voices in the church was established, scholars sought to document the specific limitations placed by the male-defined religious systems on the experiences of women. Both women’s studies and women in religious studies value the personal experiences of women in the data studied and in its analysis. This is non-quantifiable research because of its dependence on women’s stories of their experiences. Both disciplines are cultural systems in which both researcher and subject are involved. This lack of quantifiable data has provided a reason for some scholars to call research in women’s studies into question in the academic world.

Women’s studies are more conversational and collective than the traditional academic pattern. Researchers in women’s studies have acknowledged that their activities challenge the system of “credit” in which scholarship is solitary and ideas are owned. Their male colleagues have been surprised by their non-hierarchical way of working and skeptical about its efficiency (Carr, 1988, p. 72).
The study of religion from a women’s perspective has two fundamental problems for the researcher. One is the subject matter which remains set in a context of an androcentric framework. The other is the researcher. Many scholars are realizing that the study of religion involves one’s own subjectivity and reflexivity. According to Ursula King (1989), “It is not enough to ask what we know, but equal attention needs to be paid to how we come to know what it is that we know” (p. 19). The methodological process can be summed up as starting with a hermeneutics of suspicion with regard to traditional sources and methods. Hermeneutics involves the interpretation or explanation of a text. The task of interpretation is continuous. “One reads the text, and makes an interpretation of what one has read; but just as the text was not self-evident, neither is the interpretation” (Reese, 196, p. 297). This process of interpretation and reinterpretation can be never ending as each scholar approaches an interpretation with an individual set of experiences.

Throughout the Bible one finds that God is not only referenced using male imagery. God is spoken of as “giving birth, suckling young, fighting like a mother bear for her cubs, gathering chicks under her wing” (Van Leeuwen, 1993, 381). These are images that are not often used by theologians or heard in sermons, but give those reading and hearing them a picture of God that is nurturing and loving, not wrathful and angry.

This rereading is followed by a critical deconstruction and reconstruction of key elements of the writings and traditions that are being studied. The result of this way of looking at texts is a combination of the author’s worldview and scholarship which leads to new interpretations of readings and doctrines.

The research methodology of one noted feminist theologian is described here. Once a problem is defined, feminist theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether proceeds with a three-fold process (Ruether, 2002, p. 179).

First, the theologian develops a systematic critique of the effects of male bias on the symbols and forms of Christian faith. Second, she seeks alternative traditions within collective historical heritage and the religious experience of women. Third, she revisions symbols of the Christian faith to be more inclusive of women’s experiences.

Rosemary Radford Ruether (2002) uses a set of principles to guide her research in the field of feminist theology (p. 197). Those principles are as follows

1. A rejection of any concept of inerrancy or infallibility in the use of authoritative sources of scripture or tradition;
2. The norm of experience, specifically the critical experience of dissent from oppression and
the shaping of hope;

3. An ethical norm that seeks to expand the well-being of others without victimizing those others;

4. An eschatological norm that emphasizes the Christian redemptive hope that lies in the future of God’s realm.

Women scholars of religion enter into dialogue with the experience of the Christian community, starting with the earliest communities described in the Bible. In these early communities, one sees a continual tension between the dominant social system that sacrilizes the status quo (those in power) and those who critique it and call for a transformation of the present society (the prophets). Scholars enter into these texts as dialogue partners, debating the good and the bad of these texts starting from the time that they were written.

June O’Connor (1989) has grouped the questions and studies of women in religion as the “three R’s of rereading, reconceiving, and reconstructing religious tradition” (p. 101). These three R’s could be applied to any oppressed group that is looking for their place within the religious tradition and is not limited to women.

Rereading requires a reexamining of religious materials and traditions with an eye toward women’s presences or absences. Reconceiving involves the retrieval and recovery of lost sources and suppressed visions. By reconceiving, scholars are looking to reclaim women’s religious heritage. Reconstructing includes the seeing of a religious tradition from a feminist perspective.

Where do we go in the Future?

Female scholars in the social sciences will need to continue to wrestle with the question of what it means to be human. Religious studies will need to reassess its use of the “traditional dichotomies of western thought that identify women with nature, passion, and emotion” (Warne, 1989, p. 42) while identifying men with reason and intellect. Until this philosophical dichotomy is addressed, religious studies will not be able to engage the scholarship that is presented by women’s studies.

Another problem to be addressed is deciding who is to be considered the authorities. The field of religious studies needs to address the nature of expertise, and the social location of its authoritative sources. This will question centuries of theological study where the articulation of reality was done by men. Those authorities have found the subordination of women to be “relatively unremarkable, consonant with the received cultural gender script and their own interests” (Warne, 1989, p. 43).
Religious studies and women’s studies would both benefit from increased mutual discourse. Religious studies would help women’s studies develop its understanding of religion as a complex cultural system instead of as a closed patriarchal system. Also the work done by religious scholars on symbol, ethos/mythos, and cultural narrative could prove equally useful to scholars of women’s studies. This work would help with defining women’s experience from cross-cultural perspectives.

Women’s studies could help religious studies to become as sensitive to women’s issues as it has to cross-cultural issues. Religious studies has worked to be inclusive of experiences of people from across the globe, but is still slow at accepting the perspectives and experiences of women. “Where women’s voices are absent, scholars might then be prompted to inquire into causes, thus weaving a far richer tapestry of information than current assumptions allow” (Warne, 1991, p. 356).

This paper has focused only on the experiences of women is the area of religious studies. Womanist theologians, Latino/a theologians, and Asian-American theologians are also seeking to be heard in the arenas of theological study. All of these experiences entering the areas of Biblical studies and doctrinal theology will make the experience richer for all of us who work in this field.

On a practical level, at a time when budgets are forcing universities to eliminate departments that can be defined as “marginal,” smaller departments need to work together to demonstrate a relevance for future generations of scholars. There are voices that need to be heard in the field of religious studies, history, anthropology, and other fields. In order to create well-rounded scholars, we need to open their minds to experiences that are different from their own and who have been silenced throughout history.
References


Biography

Karen Madigan, STM, MLIS, MTS, is the Public Services Librarian at the Virginia Theological Seminary in Alexandria, Virginia. She holds a Master of Theological Studies degree from Trinity Lutheran Seminary in Columbus, Ohio (1999), a Master of Library and Information Studies from Kent State University (2010), and a Master of Sacred Theology from the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia (2009).