FEMALE IDENTITY AND THE HISTORY OF RELIGIONS

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This paper is placed towards the beginning of our discussions on the role of methodology and theory in the study of religion, a fast growing field of scholarly concern as is evident from numerous publications. The paper is mainly of an exploratory nature; it asks a number of questions rather than provides answers. But these questions may help to contribute an important orientation for the discussions of the many theoretical issues which will be raised over the next few days.

Much has been written on religious studies as an academic field with heterogeneous approaches which require a unified theory or at least a more explicitly formulated theoretical orientation (Honko 1979; Schmid 1979; Vernoff 1983; Wiebe 1983). In 1983 the American Academy of Religion established an ongoing 'Consultation on Theory and Methods for the Study of Religion' towards which a session of this Congress will contribute. In exploring the various questions concerning the field of religious studies and the nature of the academically disciplined means for studying religion, Charles Elliott Vernoff has spoken of 'the foundational issues of academic identity' and the deeper issue of 'fundamental intellectual clarity and integrity for individuals and collegial cohesion for groups of scholars in disparately staffed departments' (1983:110), whilst Ross Reat has pointed out that scholars in religious studies have been somewhat lax in developing 'a clear formulation of methodological identity' (1983: 465).

The area of methodology and theory is as crucial for the identity of our field as for us as individuals involved in a particular scholarly enterprise. To explain my own concern with methodology and situate this paper against a wider background, I need to mention that I published a survey on the 'Historical and Phenomenological Approaches to the Study of Religion. Some major developments and issues under debate since 1950'. It analysed the international discussions on methodology between 1950 and 1980 but appeared only recently in print in *Contemporary Approaches to the Study of Religion* edited by Frank Whaling (Berlin/New York/Amsterdam 1984). At a late stage of editing I added a final footnote to this survey which reads: 'The above discussion, and the language in which it is expressed, accurately reflect the major issues debated up till the late 1970s. It does not incorporate the more recent feminist critique of the study of religion. This would require a reassessment of the issues in another article' (King 1984a: 153).

It is not possible to undertake such a reassessment in this paper. But I would like to share some critical comments which have occurred to me more recently through my own change of awareness and a more thorough acquaintance with the work of feminist writers in religious studies and with critical feminist literature in other fields of the humanities.

The title of my paper 'Female Identity and the History of Religions' arose not only out of wider reflections on theoretical and practical issues pertaining to religious studies. It was also a direct response to the Congress theme of 'Religion and Identity'

which invited an analysis of the 'sense of personal and corporate identity' which religion has provided for individuals and communities throughout history (Congress Brochure). 'History of religions' is here understood in the widest sense as embracing numerous methods and approaches applied in the study of religions.

The sections of the Congress pose a problem of personal identity for women scholars in religion as no major section has been allocated to the discussion of women and religion or the feminist critique of religious studies. A growing number of college courses and publications have appeared in this area over the last decade. The image and role of women, the place of women's religious experience, of their exclusion from or participation in ritual, of female imagery and symbolism in sacred scriptures and theological writings, is not only of great importance in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, but also in Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, African, Near Eastern, Far Eastern and other religions. This subject is a growth area in religions studies, and it is well known that the American Academy of Religion has had a section on 'Women and Religion' since 1972. The last IAHR Congress in Winnipeg (1980) also included a special section on this subject, although it was somewhat oddly entitled 'Femininity and Religion'. It thus came as a surprise, if not to say a shock, when the current IAHR Congress did not include a section on women and religion. At a Congress devoted to 'Religion and Identity' one must not only investigate the importance of religion in general or of particular religions for personal, social, cultural and political identity, or enquire into foundational issues of academic identity; one must also ask when reading the titles of sections and papers, how far the categories of the past and the history of our field restrict our perception of breakthroughs and paradigm shifts occurring in the present. Women and religion are again nowhere on the agenda in Sydney and this in 1985, during the year which marks the end of the UN decade for women, and has recently seen the international women's conference in Nairobi. This situation highlights the invisibility and general marginality of women in the history of religions as a field of studies, so far largely defined by male scholars of religion. For contemporary female scholars, especially those who apply a feminist perspective to their work on different religious traditions, this marginality raises important questions about their own identity as well as that of their discipline.

The methodological debate is not only about the question *what* is the study of religion, what are its methods and theory, but it must also be concerned with the question of *how* and *by whom* the study of religion is undertaken and *who* can identify with it. Which perspectives, methods and approaches have until now been left out? So far, the study of religion has hardly been gender-specific, and insufficient attention has been given to sexual differentiation in the practice and theory of religion. There is no recognition of this differentiation and of women as a category in their own right in the study of religion in recent surveys on the field and its methods (Crosby 1981; Honko 1979; Waardenburg 1973, 1978; Whaling 1984a, 1984b).

In the methodological debate it is important to analyze the values, presuppositions and basic orientations which have consciously or unconsciously shaped the prevalent methods and theories in the study of religion. Contemporary feminist thought acts as a critical category for examining the unacknowledged ideological assumptions which inform all disciplines of knowledge as historically constructed. From a feminist-critical perspective one must investigate how far the major conceptual tools and interpretative theories used for the classification and interpretation of religious data have been developed in the gender-exclusive and therefore one-sided manner. This requires what has been called a hermeneutics of suspicion vis-a-vis existing models, theory and practice in the study of religion and vis-a-vis its own history.

To clarify this argument, I shall briefly explain what I mean by feminism and its importance as a perspective in religious studies (I). I shall then illustrate by some

examples from past and present how female scholarly identity must call into question certain theoretical and practical perspectives in the history of religions (II). Finally, in my conclusion, I shall consider the question of how the change in contemporary consciousness may be an important influence in shaping new directions in our field of studies (III).

I

The new feminism which has emerged since the 1960s is not only an important social and political movement, but it also functions as a critical perspective which passes judgement on society and its institutions. Although very diverse in its manifestations and expressions, feminism has produced a wide-ranging body of theory and praxis which has affected many areas of contemporary culture. It has been said that 'consciousness raising is the essential first step in feminist theory' but also that 'feminist strategy and feminist scholarship at this moment in their development are hampered by the absence of a solid theoretical perspective' (Keohane, Rosaldo & Gelpi, vii, 99). Whilst there is no unified theory of feminism, there are a number of different theoretical perspectives available, often linked to specific political orientations. There is also a number of important elements which are common to the different forms of feminism. An absolutely basic one is the experience of consciousness raising already mentioned which gives expression to women's active determination to shape their own selves and the world around them, including history and culture. Finding a sense of self is not only a personal experience but it happens at the social level to women as a group today. This newly discovered and newly expressed sense of self at the personal and social level indicates a new identity among contemporary women, an identity which also affects women scholars and has produced a new feminist scholarship in different areas of the humanities, including religious studies.

Feminist thought has a negative and positive aspect. Negatively, it uncovers the dualistic and gender-exclusive assumptions of traditional knowledge and social practice whilst its positive task consists in developing more integral, holistic ways of thinking and living by linking together personal, social, political and spiritual dimensions of human life and envisaging alternative forms of society and culture.

The feminist critical perspective might be summarized as essentially a critique of patriarchy, androcentrism and sexism, terms which are often used interchangeably in feminist literature, although each has a different history and different connotations. Patriarchy, the rule of the fathers, is a theory about both the history and nature of society. Initially related to social, economic, religious and political power structures, it is now seen to be embedded in attitudes, values, language and thought as well as internalized in the character structures of both sexes. Androcentrism, a term first coined by the American sociologist Lester F Ward in 1903, indicates a perspective in which the male is primary and the female secondary. The term is widely used today to indicate any position or view where the male is taken as the norm, representing the generic view of all that is human without explicitly taking into account the experience and perspective of women.

As Rita Gross has written in her discussion of androcentrism in the methodology of the history of religions: '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' (1977, 7).

Sexism has been defined as an exclusive ordering of life by way of gender. Gender is understood as a socially and culturally constructed identity and role whereas biological sex is given. Sexist language, attitudes or behaviour can be exclusive of either sex but the occurrence of sexism is recognised as currently applying mainly to the situation of women. In works on religious studies, as in books on religious education, one might point more to a 'sexism by omission' (Trevett 1983) than to explicitly anti-feminist attitudes. 'Sexism by omission' is also an appropriate characterization for criticizing the structure of the Sydney Congress sections, but, in recognition of this omission, it is perhaps a small compensation that the two papers this morning have been grouped under the overall theme of 'Sexism, Identity and the Study of Religion'.

The feminist perspective addresses new questions to the different religious traditions and thereby discovers new data which were overlooked, lost or suppressed in the past. At the most basic level, one can ask how far women's experience has been taken into account at all in the articulations and theological reflections of the world's religions. What do the sacred scriptures, the theological and spiritual writings teach about women? Or how far do the different religions draw on feminine images and symbols in speaking about the fullness of reality and transcendence, about the nature and experience of the spirit? To what extent do women take part in ritual and religious practices, choose to follow the religious life or hold positions of authority in particular religions? Most important is women's own religious experience. Why has it been so rarely expressed in official theological literature whereas it has contributed so much to mystical and spiritual writings? With regard to the study of the past it has been said that the 'single greatest barrier to scholarship on the topic of women's lives and experiences, apart from androcentric consciousness, is that it is much more difficult to find the data in historical than in contemporary situations because fieldwork is more likely than texts to contain the potential information' (Gross 1983, 588 f).

It is particularly important to study women's religious experience in the present, and this for several reasons. What we know about the religious experiences of women in the past often concerns exceptional women who diverged from traditional female roles and thereby attracted the attention of their contemporaries. Yet we need to know much more about the everyday religious experiences of ordinary women (Holden 1983). Another area where little work has been done is the participation and place of women in new religious movements today. Yet another area of more than theoretical interest is the contribution of feminism to the transformation of contemporary religious consciousness (King 1983, 1986) and to the reinterpretation of traditional religious practices (1984b) which under the influence of a new feminist self-understanding have now become accessible to women whilst they were formerly forbidden to them. At the level of religious practice, the greatest challenge arises from the question of how far traditional religious beliefs and practices can still speak to women with a changed consciousness today and remain credible. Feminists have sometimes described the liberating group experience of consciousness raising and the newly found identity of sisterhood as a conversion experience of an almost religious nature. From the perspective of studying religion in contemporary society the emergence of a distinct spirituality and new religious cults among women is another important phenomenon worth investigating.

II

The task of feminism in religious studies according to Rosemary Radford Ruether is defined by the historical nature of female exclusion and male ideological bias in the tradition. 'The first task of feminist critique takes the form of documenting

the fact of this male ideological bias itself and tracing its sociological roots'. 'The second agenda of feminist studies in religion aims at the discovery of an alternative history and tradition that supports the inclusion and personhood of women' (1981, 391). This provides not merely an additional, interesting agenda for religious studies with a separate focus on women, a mere addendum to our existing knowledge of religion whereby the past gap about the image, role and experience of women in religion is now being filled, but at its most radical it has the potential to induce a paradigm shift in the study of religion by creating a new orientation for all previous perspectives and theories, a radical change in consciousness affecting the gathering, description and comprehension of all data. This necessary paradigm shift was strongly expressed in Rita Gross' paper (1983) 'Women's Studies in Religion: The State of the Art, 1980' presented at the Winnipeg Congress. But so far, little institutional and organizational recognition has been given to the transformative power of the feminist perspective in religious studies. International surveys of the study of religion as a whole, such as Waardenburg's *Classical Approaches to the Study of Religion* (1973) or Whaling's *Contemporary Approaches to the Study of Religion* (1984), or major publications on methodology and hermeneutics, include little explicit reference to women as either subjects or objects of study in the history of religions field. It is not only the absence of women as either authors or objects of study, but even more the fact that their perspective and experience have not entered into the theoretical considerations pursued in recent methodological works which must be considered a contributory cause for the continuing crisis of identity among female scholars of religion. I shall list some past and present examples to illustrate the inherent androcentrism of the history of religions as a field of studies.

Looking at the historiography of our field from a contemporary feminist perspective, one discovers that the early women pioneers in the comparative study of religion are generally overlooked by historians. Women such as Hannah Adams (1755-1831), in L H Jordan's account of *Comparative Religion* (1905), still listed among the pioneers who helped to make the nineteenth century advance of the discipline possible, or Lydia Mary Child with her survey of oriental religions, or Carolyn H Dall, one of the first American writers on Shinto, or Annie E Cheney, working on Mahayana Buddhism, are virtually unknown today (Jackson 1981).

Similarly, history books frequently refer to the World Parliament of Religions, Chicago 1893, but there is never any mention of the contribution of 21 official women lecturers, including one Indian woman, whose addresses are part of the published proceedings (Burrows 1893). At the height of the first wave of feminism there were many women participants at Chicago, parallel women's congresses and meetings were held, women were part of the organizing committee and women reported on the Parliament in the press. There were not only women speakers such as Annie Besant or Mary Baker Eddy, the founder of Christian Science, but seven ordained women from different churches as well as some women scholars gave major lectures. Eliza R Sutherland from Ann Arbor lectured on 'The Importance of a Serious Study of all Religions' and Alice C Fletcher from Harvard spoke on 'The Religion of the North American Indians'. As Mrs Henrotin, the woman vice-president of the Congress, said in her address: 'That the experiment of an equal presentation of men and women in a Parliament of Religions has not been a failure, I think can be proved by the part taken by the women who have had the honour to be called to participate in this great gathering' (Burrows, 63). But posterity has not given these women the credit and acknowledgement they deserve. This is true of women scholars in the history of religions generally. If one thinks of the contribution of Mrs Rhys Davids to the study of Buddhism, of Mrs Sinclair Stevenson to the study of Hinduism and Jainism, or of Jane Harrison to the study of Greek Religion — to name but a few

— one must ask why it is that in such an important reference work as Waardenburg's *Classical Approaches to the Study of Religion* and other works on the history of the discipline not a single woman scholar is listed. It is not that women scholars did not exist — they existed in much smaller numbers for reasons we cannot go into here — but through lack of recognition in the annals of the discipline even the few are assigned to oblivion. The only entry on 'woman' in Waardenburg's index, for example, is to 'woman, religious capacities' referring to an extract from Bachofen's *Myth, Religion and Mother Right.*

Can one not say about women scholars in the history of religions what an art historian has written about the lack of recognition of women artists in official art histories:

> The most signal omission of feminist art history to date is our failure to analyse *why* modern art history ignores the existence of women artists, why it has become silent about them, why it has consistently dismissed as insignificant those it did not acknowledge. To confront these questions enables us to identify the unacknowledged ideology which informs the practice of this discipline and the values which decide its classification and interpretation of all art. (Parker and Pollock 1981, 49).

The contribution of women scholars is largely ignored in the official accounts of the history of the discipline because of the androcentric presuppositions with which data are selected as historically significant. This androcentric perspective becomes even more apparent where historians of religion write about women as objects of study in an externalised and objectifying manner without taking women's own subjectivity and personhood into account. A good example of this kind of writing is Heiler's substantial compendium *Die Frau in den Religionen der Menschheit* (1977), a veritable 'Gang durch die Geschichte der Stellung der Frau in den Religionen' (188), in positions assigned to her by others without even a hint of questioning this perspective and its underlying assumptions.

Such objectifying description has been called 'the most devastating component of the androcentric outlook'. When women *per se* are mentioned, as they sometimes must be in accounts of religion

> androcentric thinking deals with them only as an object exterior to mankind, needing to be explained and fitted in somewhere, having the same epistemological and ontological status as trees, unicorns, deities, and other objects that must be discussed to make experience intelligible. Therefore, in most accounts of religion, males are presented as religious subjects, as namers of reality, while females are presented only in relation to the males being studied, only as objects being named by the males being studied ... (Gross 1983, 583 f.)

It is not a question of simply adding a paragraph or chapter on women to history of religions books where there was none before. The investigation of the religious experience and lives of women, of cultural and religious attitudes towards women and of female imagery and symbolism, as currently undertaken by many women scholars, represents not only a further addition to the growth of knowledge in a cumulative sense, but it explicitly calls into question previous perspectives and methodologies.

At an analytic level this applies especially to a critique of the language and categories of thought used in the description and interpretation of religious data. Language is the key indicator of the androcentric thinking of male historians of religion and remains a source of profound alienation for women. Even today scholars write without a critical self-reflective attitude towards their use of exclusive language when dealing with the 'religious history of *man*' or describing religious studies as dealing

'with *man* in *his* religious dimension' or referring to 'the history and nature of *man's* religiousness' or '*man's* transcendence' (Whaling 1984b, 5, 25, 26). The subject matter of the study of religion is described as 'basically *man* rather than nature'; the field of religion includes 'the worldviews of *men* and a transcendent referent' (Whaling 1984a, 386, 389). A new interpretative theory is described as having the advantage of containing 'no explanation of why *man* is religious' (Crosby 1981, 291; all emphases are mine). These few examples could be multiplied at length. The generic use of 'man' in English, as in some other languages, often masks the unexamined assumption that the human male is simply taken as the generically human but often *excludes* women as a specific category.

At one level, language is the most obvious area to criticize, and some may consider it the most superficial, but given our contemporary level of differentiated consciousness about the place of gender in society, history and culture, it is simply no longer acceptable to write in a naive and unreflective manner. Feminists have worked a great deal on the analysis of language, and contemporary writers in religious studies ought to take note of the following comment:

> While language is the means by which we speak ourselves and communicate to others, on a deeper level it also controls what can be said or even thought, and by whom. It is therefore in the field of language that women's struggle must also take place: in the way women try to speak themselves and are spoken of, in the ways women represent themselves and are represented by culture. (Parker and Pollock, 114f.)

So many studies remain trapped in gender-exclusive language. This is particularly regrettable when the subject under discussion is 'the mystic', always referred to as 'he' by Horne (1983) even though women have made outstanding contributions to the history of mysticism and some of them are used as examples in the same book. Yet in his introduction the author says: 'One of the interesting characteristics of the mystic, which makes *him* especially relevant for a philosophic study of this subject, is that in spite of *his* usually being religious *he* is not always moral. I shall therefore explain *him* in both *his* modes ...' (X; my emphases).

Other authors are more perceptive and use more inclusive language by referring to 'person' rather than 'man' or speak of the student of religion as 'he or she' (Cahill 1985) or even 's/he' (Wiebe 1984), which becomes quite unpronounceable. In any case, changing vocabulary is relatively simple, but it may not necessarily imply a complete change of thinking. Several women authors have stressed that the major conceptual tools used in the study of religion require critical analysis and that we need to develop a truly comprehensive anthropology of *homo religiosus*. On closer analysis, previous scholarly works on religious anthropology often turn out to be mainly concerned not with *homo* but with *vir religiosus* with no space at all for the voices and experiences of women. One author naively refers to 'the predominantly male practitioners of religion' (Brenneman *et. al.*, 1982, 133) when in fact he means the official religious specialists, authorities and functionaries. Who are the people practising religion? If one understands practitioners as participants rather than specialists, it is well known that in many religions women adhere to religious beliefs and practices to a higher degree than men and represent a larger percentage of participants in religion. This fact has not been considered as a datum of significance in itself until very recently.

Another important aspect open to the criticism of exclusiveness is the whole area of the analysis of conceptualisations of the Divine, of the idea of the holy and the focus of the transcendent in the study of religions. Are the interpretative categories which have been developed so far sufficiently wide-ranging and comprehensive to take full account of the perspective of women? Similarly, the whole field of the study

of religious experience on which much has been published in recent years, seems to have been rarely examined from a perspective giving adequate attention to sexual differentiation.

III

One could go on citing examples of the androcentric patterns of thought prevalent in the theory and praxis of the history of religions and thus highlight further the selectivity operative in the construction of our discipline as knowledge. One must always ask how far a particular perspective is inherent in the data being studied, or how far it is part of the outlook of the scholar studying the data. It is my contention that the current methodological debate still reflects a predominantly androcentric bias or sexism by exclusion and omission which is detrimental to the identity of the history of religions in the widest sense as a field of studies, and which adversely affects the personal identity of women scholars within it.

The introduction of the feminist critical perspective has methodological and practical implications (for the organization of the IAHR for example). At the practical level it is perhaps true to say that the change in consciousness arising out of feminism has affected the field of religious studies so far less than other disciplines. This is not only evident from the existing literature but also from the thematic orientations of the present IAHR Congress. Another example may be quoted from the German branch of the IAHR, the Deutsche Vereinigung für Religionsgeschichte. One member suggested as next year's conference theme 'Religion der Frauen, feministische Theorien der Gegenwart in der Religionswissenschaft' (DVRG 1985, 14), a theme which did not find general acceptance. As the feminist orientation and consciousness is, comparatively speaking, so little developed in our field, it is no wonder that in next year's programme on 'Feminism and the Humanities', developed by the Humanities Research Centre of the Australian National University, religious studies, as far as one can see at present, has not found a place in the three interdisciplinary conferences which have been planned (entitled 'Feminist Criticism and Cultural Production'; 'Feminism and the Humanities: Enrichment, Expansion or Challenge?'; 'Feminist Enquiry as a Transdisciplinary Enterprise', HRC 1985, 7f). Is this not a sufficient reason for questioning the identity of our field and its place within the world of scholarship and knowledge? Is it not imperative to examine whether our regulative ideals have become fossilized and are static remains from the past rather than dynamic and alive to the issues of the present?

At present, the crisis of religious studies and the crisis of method (Wiebe 1984) are often debated. If new directions in theory and methodology can contribute to a transformation of our existing discipline, the breaking of boundaries and the searching for new ground must also include a concern for the feminist critical perspective. I would like to make two concluding observations why this is important.

First, beyond all specific criticisms regarding the exclusiveness and dualism of language and thought, of androcentrism and sexism, the feminist perspective at its most comprehensive undertakes what has been termed a critique of the masculinity of our culture. It radically calls into question certain traditions of an exclusively objective, analytical and rational analysis which cannot reveal the full experience of being female, male, or simply human. This critical orientation meets other criticisms made elsewhere, in the debates about hermeneutics for example, or in the debates about paradigm shifts in science. So far the study of religion has been dominated by a heavily intellectualist and even scientistic approach with an emphasis on the cerebral production of ideas, concepts, doctrines, models and theories. The role of imagination and feeling, of symbol, story and image, are only slowly being recognized but have

not been methodologically fully integrated into a general theory of the study of religion. The ongoing debates about the role of empathy, of the category of meaning, about the place of insiders and outsiders (Ross Reat 1983) are an indication of this.

Secondly, the emergence of the feminist perspective represents a new stage in the history of consciousness which will have profound effects on contemporary and future religious thought and practice. It acts as a catalyst and agent of transformation in human self-understanding. Throughout most of human history sexual differentiation was taken for granted without being critically reflected upon whilst now we have reached a stage of critical reflection which is often divisive through highlighting differences and introducing separatism. However, what is being sought is an integral meaning of human sexual differentiation for both female and male identity. One can correlate this search for a wider, more integral and holistic framework with current changes in religious consciousness and a critique of the dualistic thinking of the historical religions, with the renewed interest in the unitary forms of archaic religious thought and the search for a more integral system of symbols which can be witnessed in many areas of contemporary culture.

These ideas are all open to criticism and discussion. They have been presented in the belief that when discussing issues of religion and identity and developing further theories in our field of studies, we must not only be attentive to the religions of the past but be equally aware of the dynamic of religious life and thought in the present. If past knowledge shapes present knowledge, then the development of new knowledge for the future — whether in the gathering of data or their theoretical elucidation — must of necessity imply a critique of the knowledge accumulated in both past and present.

At present the feminist perspective is not yet part of the common horizon of our field. I have argued that the development of a truly inclusive framework for the study of religion, or more differentiated conceptual tools as well as of different perspectives of analysis and synthesis requires that full space is given to the voices and perspectives of women. If 'the accurate description and analysis of worldviews' is a basic task of the study of religion (Vernoff 111), then the worldviews of women must become an integral part of the dominant theorizing in religious studies. It is only when a critical shifting of the foundations of our discipline has occurred that its identity as a field of studies can be more clearly focussed and that, in turn, the identity of its practitioners, both female and male, can be more fully developed and recognized.

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