

Editorial

Introduction to Special Issue on Religion and Feminism

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INTRODUCTION

A special issue on 'Religion and Feminism' is significant and timely, the topic however has often taken a backseat to that of 'religion and gender'. This corresponds with the mainstreaming of gender, feminist and women's studies in the humanities and social sciences since the 1990s (Richardson and Robinson, 2020). The development of the subfield of religion and gender has expanded in scope because of social and political change, migration flows, media and technological reach and the porosity of private and public domains. The growth of this subdiscipline has been evident in the appearance of specialist conference themes, funded research and established journals, and there is much more consideration of how religion and gender shape and are shaped by social structures. For example, how they are part of intersecting axes of oppression and liberation (e.g., Bilge, 2010; Singh, 2015), residual and ongoing effects of colonialism (e.g., Pui-Lan and Donaldson, 2015), white supremacy and patriarchy (e.g., Joshi, 2020), processes of racism and racialisation (e.g., Selod *et al.*, 2023), ablism (e.g., Klassen, 2016; Waldock, 2023), and sexism and marginalisations (e.g., Avishai, 2008; Browne *et al.*, 2010; Gaddini, 2022). We recently co-edited with Sian Hawthorne *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Religion, Gender, and Sexuality* (Sharma *et al.*, 2024) which augments these discussions and reveals the importance of critical, transnational, decolonial, intersectional and feminist approaches, demonstrating how religion and gender are lived and implicated in relations of power in varied contexts (also see Starkey and Tomalin, 2022).

Feminist theory and research are embedded and implicit in this wide-ranging scholarship, often providing the conceptual scaffolding but less prominently identified front and centre with religion. 'Religion and feminism' because of the growth of religion and gender does not typically comprise a special issue in sociology, religious, gender, feminist and women's studies journals (although see *Feminist Review*, 2011: Issue 97; *Journal for the Study of Religion*, 2011: Issue 2; *Religions*, 2018: Issue 12; and the *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*). Why might this be? On the one hand, feminist religious studies have been commonly thought of as reticent in their stance because of their disciplinary seclusion (Llewellyn, 2015; Llewellyn and Trzebiatowska, 2013). On the other, secular feminisms have frequently been thought to neglect women's religious experiences relegating them to what 'other' women do as 'cultural difference' (Fernandes, 2003). Contributing to religion and feminism's occlusion is that the religions/secularisms 'binary is also doubly gendered: women are linked with religion and men with secularism, and religious women [also] represent subordination and non-feminism while secular women embody liberation and feminism' (Nyhagen, 2017: 498). Thus, secular and religious studies feminists have been sceptical of each other for the inclusions and exclusions that can occur, and because of histories of colonialism, and androcentric and somatic norms (Puwar, 2004) that have informed the spaces of academia and religious institutions. The sacred/secular divide also persists. Yet, not participating in organised worship does not mean being without faith or a relationship with an energy or divine force (Davie, 1994). People's relationships to religion and spirituality change, and are lived out in several ways, including in relation to feminist politics and practices.

Despite these tensions, scholars have shown how religion and feminism can work together to shape authority, teachings, rituals, sacred texts, roles, and lived experience in and outside of institutions, traditions, and communities. Bringing religion and feminism together to be interrogated, observed, and analysed and as forms of analysis can reveal societal challenges and change. This special issue shares this aim: to build on this body of work and to reveal how religion and feminism are continually in movement and relation. The questions we asked

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contributors to consider were: In what ways is the relationship between religion and feminism being lived, transformed, challenged, utilised, or extinguished? How are the categories of religion and feminism being questioned and therefore their relationship to one another? What new insights can be gleaned from the relationship between religion and feminism? How does this relationship inform inclusions and exclusions? And in what ways is it present and responding to changing social worlds that include global crises of conflict, economics, health, and social wellbeing? The nine articles on this topic that are included in this special issue offer their responses and much to 'think through' – in other words how religion and feminism, amid socio-political transformations and the mundane, are made and unmade, done and undone (Bannerji, 1995). Together these pieces offer notable insights into the contemporary relationship between religion and feminism, a complex relationship that is rich in intersectoral vantage points.

The contexts in which these articles are written vary across countries and cultures. The manuscripts showcase lived experiences of contexts located in Australia, Brazil, Canada, India, Iran, the UK, and the USA. Within them, secularisation, religious pluralism, and nationalist ideologies jostle to varying degrees. All have been impacted by histories of colonialism, and all have experienced feminist activism responding to an array of issues and that include religion and religious actors. These dynamics form the backdrop to which the authors of this special issue grapple with, shaping their critical work. As a group of articles, they point to three key themes related to religion and feminism.

First this special issue highlights authors employing and foregrounding feminist theories to analyse religious participation, work, and spaces and how through feminist analyses religion can contribute to both oppression and empowerment. Daniela Bevilacqua's article focuses on 'the Kinnar Akhārā, a Hindu religious order of gender non-conforming individuals rooted in the *bijrā* tradition but structured akin to traditional Hindu ascetic groups', established in 2015. Set among patriarchal structures and right-wing Hindutva ideologies, Bevilacqua shows how the Kinnar Akhārā are enacting a religious transfeminism. She draws on Emma Tomalin's (2006) 'religious feminism' to theorise 'religious transfeminism' and states that rather than 'rejecting religion for its inherent patriarchy' (Tomalin, 2006: 385) the Kinnar Akhārā have opted for a reinterpretation of its 'core' values – read *sanātana dharma* – to reclaim a religious role. Bevilacqua demonstrates how religious transfeminism interacts with decolonial and intersectional aspects in her ethnographic research with *kinnar* leaders. She also shows how by utilising Hindu religious texts to create their own tradition and authority, the Kinnar Akhārā occupy religious spaces that had been barred to them, thus cultivating recognition and empowerment of transgender people.

Feminist theory has also been important in understanding Christian traditions which have long sustained cultures of patriarchy that uphold gendered norms that have contributed to inequality. Tracy McEwan, Rosie Clare Shorter and Tanya Riches shed light on those feminist Christian women who step forward to call out gender inequality and sexism in their churches, those who protest and importantly 'complain'. Yet, when they do, they are subject to abuse, disapproval, exclusion and marginalisation. This is even after Christian women's historical contributions to feminist movements to progress equality in their churches. They employ Sara Ahmed's (2021) critical feminist theorisation of complaint or what she terms 'complaint as queer method' – 'wherein forming complaint collectives can enable feminists to do counter-institutional work'. Ahmed's theory helps them to locate Christian feminists as 'complainants' and to 'assemble and create a Christian feminist complaint collective'. Through case studies of complaints in Anglican, Catholic, and Pentecostal settings, which have challenged being side-lined and inequitable gender dynamics and norms, McEwan, Shorter and Riches 'reconceptualise how feminist theory can be (re)applied to feminist activism within Christian religious traditions and communities'.

Sharma and Reimer-Kirkham also implement feminist theories to analyse the work of women healthcare chaplains. Women healthcare chaplains are part of the demanding and routine life of clinical settings who challenge the social inequities that also dwell within these spaces. They do so through 'a spiritual care based in a transformative spirituality for social justice'. Sharma and Reimer-Kirkham define this form of spiritual care as 'spiritual activism' building on the work of Gloria Anzaldúa (2002), AnaLouise Keating (2005) and Leela Fernandes (2003) via an intersectional framing (Crenshaw, 1989). By locating a spiritual activism informed by the theory of Black, Chicana, and women of colour feminist scholars, they expand and demonstrate how this can offer vital insights to the study of religious women who grapple with intersectional inequalities and histories of colonialism and white benevolence in their religious and medical institutions (Gebhard *et al.*, 2022). The work of women healthcare chaplains can also expose oppositions between and among feminisms and religions, but through spiritual activism, how these divisions can diminish because their work across social difference is attuned to interdependence (Mani, 2022). Thus, feminist theory applied to forms of religious participation and power can reveal new directions of study and analysis but also the areas of socio-religious life that are pushing for change and more equity.

The feminist theory that takes centre stage to study religious activism, participation, practices and communities overlaps with our second theme. Like the array of participants rooted in the research of our first theme, the next set of articles emphasises the importance of recognising diverse religious women as foundational to feminist work

and collectives. Jamie Lee Andreson highlights this in her research on Brazilian Black Feminists Lélia Gonzales, Beatriz Nascimento and Djamila Ribeiro. She shows how their work on historical processes of liberation among Afro-Brazilian communities reveals how Afro-Brazilian religious worship – found in the maroon societies – *quilombos* and the Candomblé *terreiros* – made important contributions to social progress. She draws from oral histories, ethnography, and written publications by Candomblé priestesses and their daughter-initiates in the twentieth century, to consider the ways these societies formed autonomous Black communities foregrounding racial injustice. Andreson argues that Candomblé priestesses were key historical predecessors and foremothers of contemporary Black Feminism in Brazil and that the relation to the spiritual in Candomblé as an African Diasporic religion links historical memory and generations of people through embodied experience. Bodies and thought offer continuity of religion and feminism as they migrate and evolve through different political moments. But what happens when some religious women are included, and others excluded within feminist collectives? The relationship between religion and feminism has often posed inclusions and exclusions relating to contemporary political issues on religion, gender, and women in the public sphere.

Saaz Taher and Khaoula Zoghalmi look to the situation in Quebec, Canada where the support for Muslim women affected by secularism laws remains tenuous despite a shift within the Quebec feminist movement to take up anti-racism and intersectionality in solidarity. They specifically examine ‘the advocacy discourse against the Act Respecting the Laicity of the State (Law 21) led by the Fédération des femmes du Québec (FFQ), Quebec’s largest feminist coalition’. Taher and Zoghalmi’s interrogation of the FFQ’s support however reveals a failure to enact an intersectional framework that includes religion, and especially Islam as it relates to Muslim feminists’ lives. Thus, even though there is political support for Muslim’s women’s rights, this research uncovers a persistent perpetuation of incompatibility between feminism, Islam and consideration of Muslim women as knowledgeable feminist subjects. Marziyeh Riazi offers a similar perspective on Iranian women who have migrated to Australia. Herself also living in Australia, she concentrates on the time they lived in Iran and their experiences of legal and social restrictions informed by Islamic regulations. She explores how these affected participants’ societal treatment, self-perceptions, and relationships. Riazi importantly notes that not all the women of her sample identified as Muslim but were from other faith traditions that hindered their acceptance and participation in daily life in Iran. She argues that while Islamic feminism aimed to provide a space for women, it could not meet the needs of all women, especially those who did not identify as Muslim. Riazi argues for an ‘inclusive feminism’ as proposed by feminist scholar Naomi Zack (2005) which would help to ameliorate the exclusions and vulnerabilities experienced by the women she interviewed, and the limitations of Islamic feminism for some Iranian women. Thus, appreciating and acknowledging the diversity of religious women who identify as feminist and as part of feminist collectives is important and hard work because it exposes the inequalities that persist amidst efforts for more equality.

There is much in the issue that focuses on the social, political and religion in the everyday. Embedded in these activities and contexts are written texts that include scripture, song lyrics and academic writing. There is power in such texts because of the socio-religious norms and expectations they can espouse and challenge. In this special issue, three contributions offer feminist analysis and interrogation of different texts. Barbara Thiede and Johanna Stiebert, ‘two feminist-identifying Hebrew Bible scholars review feminist commentary on biblical texts of sexual violence’ forty years on from the publication of Phyllis Trible’s pivotal book *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (1984). They argue that the field is ‘diverse, interdisciplinary, and dynamic and that reading with empathy remains a critical part of the feminist project’. To emphasise ‘critical feminist empathy’ they examine two tribute books published in 2021 that echo Trible’s title. The first is *Terror in the Bible: Rhetoric, Gender, and Violence* (2021), a collection of essays edited by Monica Jyotsna Melanchthon and Robyn J. Whitaker. The second is *Texts After Terror: Rape, Sexual Violence, and the Hebrew Bible* (2021), a monograph by Rhiannon Graybill. Their analysis demonstrates the multiple voices contributing to feminist biblical criticism and the need for ongoing resistance to the Bible’s problematic content in contemporary societies that continue to be affected by the distress, harm, and injustice of sexual violence. In examining the two books, Thiede and Stiebert call for feminists to combine critical thinking with critical empathy in their reading of violent texts because depending on how they are read such analyses and considerations have the potential to bring about more recognition and compassion for victims, then and now.

Holy scripture, written in the past, reaches into the present interpreted in contemporary Christian music. Maiken Ana Kores provides a feminist analysis of popular evangelical Christian music revealing intersections of heterosexual and feminine ideals that are promoted amongst fans and followers of the American Christian pop/rock band Superchick. Since the 1970s, evangelical Christians have shaped and developed a consumer marketplace selling Christian books, clothing, and other paraphernalia. Alongside this, worship and popular music have emerged to become an industry in and of itself. In studying the Christian alternative pop/rock band Superchick, Kores applies a discourse analysis of their song lyrics to show how they adopt ‘feminist discourse to promote feminine adherence to purity, and obedience of Christian religious directives’, for example, abstinence until marriage. Kores argues that such a dichotomy is part of the industry’s desire to be regarded as ‘hip and

countercultural in contrast to its secular counterparts'. In doing so, her analysis of the band's songs between the 1990s and early 2000s uncovers how their presence coincided with the evangelical purity movement, endorsing conventional forms of femininity and heterosexual marriage among American girls and young women.

Applying a feminist standpoint can expose what has not changed and what remains invisible. Thus, within academic scholarship to what extent is feminism included. Is it utilised to think about women's lives in religious contexts and more specifically in the sociology of religious leadership? This is something that Katie Steeves, Lucy Smith, Elizabeth Kreiter and Jessica Stobbe question. Inspired by and building on the important work of Orit Avishai and Courtney Irby (2017) they note that developments in feminist knowledge and theorising are not always employed by sociologists of religious leadership. To interrogate this further they conducted a literature review of empirical sociological journal publications on religion, gender and leadership between January 2001 to December 2021. They used 'a combination of citation analysis, and the analytical codes developed by Avishai and Irby'. Their findings thus suggest that the existence of 'the intellectual bifurcation' also raised by Avishai and Irby subtly persists. Scholars in the subdiscipline of sociology of religion researching gender and leadership include reference to some gender or feminist works in background or literature review sections, but these are rarely current works, nor are they substantially drawn on to adequately inform concepts to situate analyses or discussions. Steeves and colleagues' work notes the in/visibility of feminist theory and analysis in academic writing on the sociology of religious leadership. More broadly, by doing such research on published academic writing it raises questions about whose work is applied and considered in analytical processes, and about citational justice, which highlights omissions of marginalised scholars' work that has been integral to knowledge pathways in the academy.

Feminism and feminist theory are dynamic, plural and critical. This is what makes them exciting. Religions in many ways are this too. When brought together they can offer rich perspectives and analyses of how they inform each other and social life especially regarding power relations, identities, culture and politics. Depending on how religion is situated, feminism can bring to light those on the margins of religious communities and society. Religion can likewise make space for the outcast or cement the position in which they already occupy. When feminism is applied, it can root out and shed light on inequity and when brought together with religion that seeks social justice it can be a powerful mix for transformation. The articles in this special issue speak to these elements showcasing a variety of contexts and actors pushing forth discussions on religion and feminism against a backdrop of social and political change.

Sonya Sharma and Dawn Llewellyn October 2024

GENERAL ARTICLES

The five articles in this issue that are included in the general section are focussed on reproductive rights, literature, and on the catastrophic war in Palestine.

Aideen C. O'Shaughnessy, in her article, 'The Antidote to the Foetal Image? The Role of Creative Performance Counterprotest in Contemporary Abortion Activism', analyses ways of resisting anti-abortion protestors through performativity. In this way, pro-choice activists 'reclaim political and affective territory and contest the representation of abortion in these images as a "violent" or "unnatural" act'.

In 'Experiences and Perceptions of Gynaecological Violence: A Descriptive Exploration of the Phenomenon from Survivors' Standpoints' Alexandra Toupin and Sylvie Lévesque use critical thinking, queer theory, and intersectional feminism to discuss their phenomenological study on Canadian people's experience of dehumanising gynaecological experiences. The experiences range from verbal microaggressions to physical violence and medical neglect. The authors recommend advocacy and discuss a possible intervention they have developed based on their findings.

Our first literary piece is by Brigita Miloš and Dubravka Dulibić Paljar ("Being Inside a Tangled Knot": *Écriture Féminine* and Elena Ferrante). In the article, the authors consider Elena Ferrante's work in the light of Ferrante's 'persistent anonymity' and the non-presence of the author. They argue that Ferrante's work is 'a new form of *écriture féminine*' that employs a language of its own and should be read accordingly.

Also in this issue's general article section is a striking video essay, 'Stray Visuality in Andrea Arnold's *American Honey*' by Katarzyna Paszkiewicz. The concept of 'stray' pervades the essay in often unsettling ways, with uncomfortable juxtapositions. Demonstrating a different way of looking, the essay makes space for alternate narratives and non-human presences.

We end this issue with Sahar Khamis and Felicity Sena Dogbatse's timely essay: 'I'm Bisan from Gaza and I'm Still Alive': Palestinian Digital Feminism and Intersectional Narratives of Resistance. As we compose this issue, the terrible Israeli destruction of Gaza and its people continues. As feminists we need to focus our critical attention on the war against the Palestinian people, understand its logic in colonial and patriarchal historical genocides, and mobilise our feminist analysis and our activisms to protest.

BOOK REVIEWS

Four book reviews complete this issue. Jessica A. Albrecht reviews *Gender, Environment and Sustainable Development: Challenges and Responses from India*. Cristina Basso discusses *Contested Social and Ecological Reproduction: Impacts of States, Social Movements and Civil Society in Times of Crisis*. Sadiq Bhanbhro considers *Kinship, Patriarchal Structure and Women's Bargaining with Patriarchy in Rural Sindh, Pakistan*. And Sneha Gole reviews *Kala Pani Crossings, Gender and Diaspora: Indian Perspectives*

Sally R. Munt and Rose Richards

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