

Religion

BASICS
THE

Religion

The Basics

Is religion the same as culture? How does it fit with life in the modern world? Do you have to 'believe' to be part of one?

From televangelism in the American South to the wearing of hijab in Britain and Egypt, from the rise of paganism to the aftermath of 9/11, this accessible guide looks at the ways in which religion interacts with the everyday world in which we live. A comprehensive introduction to the world of religion, it covers aspects including:

- religion and culture;
- how power operates in religion;
- gender issues;
- the role of belief, rituals and religious texts;
- religion in the contemporary world.

Religion: The Basics offers an invaluable and up-to-date overview for anyone wanting to find out more about this fascinating subject.

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Religion The Basics

■ Malory Nye

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Reader (1985). John Storey's *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader* (1994) contains extracts from Foucault, Gramsci, and Althusser on power and ideology. Some good general essays on religion and ideology include Gary Lease, 'Ideology' (*Guide to the Study of Religion*, Continuum 2000); and Bruce Lincoln, 'Conflict' (*Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, Chicago UP 1998). For a recent article on religion and politics, using some interesting case studies, see Jeffrey Haynes, 'Religion and politics' (*Religions in the Modern World*, Routledge 2002).

Chapter 4

Gender

A dissident in Cold War Poland once wrote that 'under capitalism man oppresses man, whilst under communism this is reversed'. I have shown in the previous chapter that what we think of as religion is often integral to such power relations, as an ideology or discourse on truth and difference. What the cynical and ironic observation I have quoted is silent about, however, is the significance of gender as a basic element of such difference. If man is oppressing man, what is happening with (and to) women? In what ways do religious traditions and ideologies create gender relations, and exert forces of power?

Despite decades of debate about feminist (and post-feminist) theory and practice, the study of religion, culture, and gender is still relatively 'new' and 'innovative'. As Darlene Juschka (2001: 1) has recently argued, 'whatever the reasons, it is evident that some fields of study are less receptive to feminist perspectives ... The study of religion has been one of those disciplines.' There has, however, been much good feminist research – some of which I will

Chapter 4

be discussing in this chapter – but unfortunately many feminist writers on religion 'have tended to be ignored or superficially acknowledged; never seriously engaged by androcentric scholars' (Juschka 2001: 1).

A fundamental problem here, which the study of religion shares with a number of other humanities subjects, is the pervasiveness of androcentricism (see, for example, Gross 1977). Androcentricism is the assumption that male-ness, the male perspective, and men's experiences are the central and most important point of reference. Such androcentricism can work in all aspects of life: from having buildings with more toilets for men than women, to education and career systems that favour men's working patterns, to the writings and ideas of male academics on their view of what religion is and how it should be understood. Challenging such androcentricism does not necessarily mean that men are wrong or unimportant, rather the point is that there are other perspectives too, which might not be the same as what is considered to be the normative male-centred one.

Decent scholarship, in trying to understand the world as it really is, therefore needs to be nuanced and sensitive to the politics of gender differences. The ways in which religions and cultures are practised and thought about are very profoundly affected, in many ways, by gender differences. Indeed, we can follow the historian Joan Scott by assuming that 'gender is a primary field within which or by which means of power are articulated', and while it is not the only such field, gender 'seems to have been a persistent and recurring way of enabling the signification of power in the West, in Judeo-Christian as well as Islamic traditions' (Scott 1986: 1069).

Gender as a basis for analysis

This may well seem like common sense so far, but in practice how can such a gender-aware (or gender-critical) perspective be applied to the study of religion? It can be a matter of asking basic questions: How do women and men experience and participate in religions? In what ways do religions

contribute to or challenge power differences between women and men? And indeed – the most frequently asked question – is (male-dominated) religion good or bad for women?

There are numerous examples of the ways in which women have come off rather badly in religious cultures: the denigration of women as 'daughters of Eve' and progenitors of sin in many Christian traditions; the veiling and separation of women amongst Muslim cultures, violence against women in practices of female genital mutilation within the context of religious circumcision in North Africa; and the notorious burning of widows at their husband's death (*sati*) which is associated with certain strands of Hindu tradition. This list is not exhaustive, and has indeed been used by a number of feminist writers (mainly writing from a European, culturally Christian background) to make the point that religion (as a global human system) is always profoundly oppressive and harmful to women – whether that religion be Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, or another. The most vocal example of such a view is Mary Daly, who argues that the concept of belief in a male deity leads to profound sexual inequalities.

But the gender-aware study of religion is not solely about religion and women (a point made by Warne 2000, among many others). The focus on women by many scholars in the field has been predominantly to redress an obvious imbalance – since most pre-feminist studies of religion were, in fact, studies of men's religion. There is, of course, nothing wrong with studies that are specifically men/male focused, just as there is much to be gained from studies that are women/female focused. However, it is intellectually dishonest, and also incomplete, to assume that what is being said from talking mainly to men, or reading texts written predominantly by men about male experiences, is somehow representative in an inclusive way of both men and women. In fact, what has emerged through the development of religion and gender studies has been an examination of not only men and religion, but also men and religion. That is, how do various cultures construct ideas of maleness and masculinity? From this, how are such ideologically constructed ideas of maleness presented as politically normative (see Boyarin 1998)?

We have to start by assuming that what goes for men is not the same as for women within a particular context (and vice versa). Indeed, because so much writing on religion (and by religious practitioners) has shown so much male bias and androcentrism, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (1984) has argued that any study of religion should be based on a 'feminist hermeneutics of suspicion'. That is, any text (whether written by an academic, a religious practitioner, or both) should not be taken at face value. The interpretation of it (its hermeneutics) should lead us to read it assuming a male-female power imbalance, in which women's voices and experiences have been ignored or excluded. We should be 'suspicious' that what is being presented as 'normal', 'inclusive', and 'representative' is in fact a male-centred perspective that marginalises women.

Sex, gender, and sexuality

However, gender studies has also pointed out an essential conundrum. That is, there is no clear consensus among scholars (feminist or non-feminist) on what is meant by the concepts of 'gender', 'female/male', or even 'women/men'. Most people have a sense of what they mean by the women-man distinction. In western cultural contexts it is extremely hard to go about the everyday practice of life without making this distinction, and most people are either one or the other. One of the complicating questions is, though, what is the difference? What makes gender, or what makes a person either a female or a male?

Part of the answer to this has been the issue of anatomy, or bodies. That is, a distinction is often made between two elements of difference: between *sex* and *gender*. In this distinction, sex is the biological 'given', the 'obvious' anatomical difference. However, there are a host of other differences which are not so biologically determined, and are in fact culturally defined – these are labelled as gender. Such gender is not 'natural' or universal, it is something that is produced by specific cultural circumstances which vary according to which particular culture one is referring to. Thus what is considered to be normal female or male behaviour is culture-dependent. There is no essential

basis for gender – instead gender is dependent on what each particular culture holds gender to be. In this sense, culture (and religion) makes man and woman.

Thus to make a statement such as 'women tend to be more religious than men', or that 'men make more effective leaders', or that 'only men should be religious leaders', is to talk in terms of gender rather than sex differences. Having a penis or a uterus does not necessarily make someone behave in certain ways. Behaviour is shaped by culture more than such 'natural' givens, and so the cultural study of differences between women and men has tended to focus much more on differences in terms of (cultural) gender, rather than (biological) sex. In particular, the prime focus of study is the ways in which such gender differences are perceived and practised within cultural contexts (and particularly across cultural contexts).

This being said, however, there are problems with this sex-gender distinction, particularly associated with the criticisms of Judith Butler (1990) and Christine Delphy (1993). That is, although it is helpful to move away from the assumption that male-ness and female-ness are 'biologically given', this does not really go far enough. For Butler, gender is a powerful discourse which creates the sense by which we define and understand the bodies we live in. And as, following Foucault, discourse defines reality, we cannot say that gender ends at a particular point, leaving the 'basic' sex- (or anatomical-) based difference. Biology does not exist 'in the raw', but is itself a product of culture. What this argument suggests is that Butler is reversing the biology-creates-behaviour argument. Instead of a person's gender behaviour being determined by their biology (a woman behaving in a certain way because of her anatomy), Butler is saying that the biology itself is constructed by practice and discourse. Being a woman is inscribed or written, onto certain bodies – a process that begins at birth when genital anatomy is scrutinised to determine whether the new-born baby is a 'boy' or a 'girl'.

What this argument can lead to is an idea of gender voluntarism. If bodies are made by discourse, it is possible to challenge accepted and expected gendered behaviour. Thus transsexuality, or transgendering (popularly labelled as a range

of activities from 'cross-dressing' to 'sex-changes' and 'gender-bending'), offer examples of ways in which a person's gender can be challenged by individuals beyond what is 'given' to them by their culture. As Henrietta Moore (1999: 158) shows, Butler herself does not wish to argue too strong a case for such voluntarism, but her ideas do leave this open as one way of analysing (and challenging) cultural constructions of gender. However, Butler's argument can be read as a critique both of biological determinism of gender, and also 'straightforward' gender polarism as *either* male or female.

This element of Butler's work makes her a key writer in the area of study known as Queer Theory, in which gender is not only a matter of sex and gender, but also of *sexuality*. How a person lives her or his gender, and to a large degree how they see their 'sex' (as a gendered body) is bound up with their sexuality. The 'basic division' of sex difference presumes sexual complementarity: the 'usual norm' is an expectation of heterosexuality, that men and women engage in sexual activities with (and are inclined towards) each other. However, if we take the assumption that gender is culturally constructed, then one could also argue that sexuality is too, and that there is nothing more 'natural' about heterosexuality than homosexuality. In fact, the distinction between the two has powerful consequences, and the concept (and derogation) of homosexuality is used in numerous political ways through which cultures and religions construct regimes of power and order (see Comstock and Henking 1997; see also Blackwood and Wiernga 1999).

Indeed, the 'normality' of heterosexuality tends to be created in hegemonic ways, by creating a sense of both order (those who are 'right') and difference (those who are abnormal, or 'bent'). Thus many Christian and Muslim traditions take strong stances on the rightness or *rightness* of heterosexuality, and conversely the 'sin' or 'disgrace' of 'unnatural' and immoral homosexuality. Such statements are not only ways of commenting on a person's sexual orientation (and practice). They are also an important cultural and religious means of defining correct gender behaviour (that is, what men and women should be), and through that of regulating social and cultural practices.

Religion and ideologies of gender

Taking some of the ideas from the previous chapter, it is worth exploring how we can analyse religion as an ideology in terms of gender (rather than class) difference. Michel Foucault's argument that power works within all social relationships, not simply from the top (ruling class) down, suggests that power is an element of gender division. In contemporary western cultures, such as the USA and Britain, as well as many non-western societies, there is a clear difference in power relations between women and men.

Patriarchy, the organisation of societies so that men tend to exert a large degree of control and power over women, is fairly ubiquitous. A large part of the agenda of contemporary feminist movements is to make a political, economic, and cultural challenge to patriarchy – at the level of both the state, and individual people's lives (hence the well-known phrase 'the personal is the political'). One means by which the power imbalance can be challenged, and changed, is through an understanding of how such power works – how it is justified, as well as its social and economic underpinnings.

As I have mentioned above, some feminist writers – such as Mary Daly (1973) have singled out religion as a basic element of patriarchy, since many religions seem to give women a particularly hard time. A Marx-derived perspective argues that the image of god is used by those in power as a misrepresentation of the struggle of class against class. This can be reworked as a feminist argument that the male creator god (of Christianity and other religions) is a tool of the oppression of women – gender against gender, rather than class against class. Such a god is no more than a matter of men writing their political dominance on to 'heaven', and the institutions which men produce for such a god, particularly churches, are key tools for controlling women.

Therefore, the ideology of a male god works to legitimate the economic and political subordination of women. For Daly, women suffer under male control, and suffer through worshipping a male god that men have forced on them. In doing so, women's participation in religious practices and beliefs is a

matter of them participating in their own exploitation and oppression. From this Daly argues that all notions of god are produced by men for these purposes. Thus, religion is androcentric (male-centred) and phallogocentric (phallus-centred), and the only place given to women within these systems is as silent, participants coerced by ideology and forced into exploitation. God is no more than this projection of power relations, there is no reality beyond that, and so god (as an object of belief) can be reduced to patriarchal oppression.

Daly's response to this ideology, however, is not the same as Marx's, for whom religion will disappear, as ideologies do, when social and economic equality is achieved. Daly argues, however, for a change in religious practice as a means of working to reject patriarchy, in particular through her famous phrase that we must 'castrate the maleness from our conceptualisation of god' (Daly 1973: 13). This does not, necessarily require a total rejection of god, but rather a rejection of the male patriarchal god of Christianity who is implicated in the excesses of patriarchal Christian culture. Indeed, Daly suggests a de-masculinised deity, who we learn to think of differently, in terms of a verb rather than a noun, as a 'Be-ing' process (1973: 28–33).

Luce Irigaray and Grace Jantzen

This idea bears similarities with the work of French feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray, particularly her idea of 'divine becoming' (Irigaray 1985a [1974], 1985b [1977], 1987; Jantzen 1998; Magee 1995: 102–6). Irigaray, however, brings a very different theoretical view to the critique of patriarchy, focusing instead on psychoanalytic-derived concepts associated with the writings of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan. This concerns the creation of human personhood, how a person is formed (as a 'subject') – and through that, a person's understanding of who they are (their 'subjectivity').

Psychoanalytic theory suggests that 'persons are not ready-made souls inserted in bodies by God. Rather, human personhood is *achieved* ... at considerable cost' (Jantzen 1998: 8). This occurs primarily through the repression of the person's

many conflicting desires, and it is religion that has traditionally 'been the source of some of the most effective ... strategies of control' (1998: 8). For Lacan, however, this repression of desire comes about for a boy when he enters into 'the symbolic', a term he uses 'to designate the broad conceptual patterns of civilization' (Jantzen 1998: 10). It is only by entering this symbolic – by developing language, and overall cultural competence – that a person becomes a unified self with her or his own subjectivity. However, Lacan's symbolic is a decidedly male domain, it exists by and for men, with women being marginalised. Indeed, for Lacan, women are so much outside of the symbolic that they are 'the Other', the thing against which the male subject defines itself. However, for women to achieve subjectivity, they must also enter into the symbolic.

This amounts, in a sense, to the same bind outlined by a Marx-derived view of ideology and religion. The symbolic, which is broadly both culture and religion, is a male construction which women must enter into. In fact, Lacan suggested that the symbolic is so much a male domain, that language itself is exclusively male. This then leaves for him a problem of how women can speak: if language (and more broadly the symbolic) is male, then women must either remain silent, or otherwise participate in a psycho-social framework that is not their own. For Irigaray it is not so simple: this is not a problem for women using language, but of psychoanalytic theorists failing to listen to women. Lacan and Freud 'were first consigning women to silence by defining language as masculine, and then complaining that women had nothing to say' (Jantzen 1998: 11). Instead, Irigaray argues, women do not lack language and the symbolic, rather they use it in different ways to men.

For women to develop a women-centred symbolic they must disrupt the male symbolic, 'displacing its masculinist structures by a new imaginary ... based ... on new ways of conceiving and being which enable women to be subjects *as women*' (Jantzen 1998: 12). This is achieved through the idea of the 'divine'. The symbolic includes not only language and culture, but also religion, which Irigaray describes as the 'linchpin of the western

symbolic' (Jantzen 1998: 12). The women's symbolic is achieved by transforming rather than rejecting religion.

In short, the divine provides a 'horizon of becoming', which serves as the 'ideal of perfection, the place of the absolute for us, its path, the hope of its fulfillment' (Irigaray 1987: 63). That is, divinity as part of the female symbolic 'is what we need to become free, autonomous, sovereign' (1987: 62). But this divine is not an 'all-powerful super-being in a timeless realm' (Jantzen 1998: 12), nor is it an 'absolute Presence' or an 'absolute Absence' (Magee 1995: 106). Rather it is part of the process of female subjectivity, through which women experience the female symbolic, and so 'discover, affirm, achieve certain ends' (Irigaray 1987: 67).

In many respects, this is a theological perspective on gender inequality. Unlike Marx's idea that religion would disappear with social change, instead social change comes through reconstruction of female subjectivity as reimagining the divine. Even so, Irigaray's god is not an absolute external force, instead s/he is embedded within the psychocultural processes of subjectivity, and may not need to exist for all time (Irigaray 1987: 62). In this respect, therefore, Irigaray's ideas can be read as both a theological exploration, and also as a theory for describing (and prescribing) social, cultural, and theological change in religious traditions.

Gender and Christianity

An important ambiguity in both these writers, however, is the slippage that can easily occur between describing patriarchy and religion, and describing patriarchy and Christianity. As Daly and many other feminist writers have shown Christian traditions through the centuries have often been oppressive for women. Many Christian traditions maintain some very strong (for some people offensive) ideological representations of gender difference. Christian texts suggest an ambiguity about the natural construction of women and men. Hence the book of Genesis describes the creation of woman/Eve in two conflicting ways: as *both* at the same time as man/Adam (Genesis 1.27), *and* also as

after, and from, man (Genesis 2.18–25). Based around this latter account – and largely ignoring the first, more gender-balanced, Genesis account – there are long traditions of misogyny and exclusion for women within the various churches.

Through Christian history, prominent (male) Christian theologians have written essays on the question of whether or not women are 'properly' human. And, of course, it is women in particular who are associated with what most Christian theologians see as the basic flaw of humankind: that is, sin, and in particular the original sin that came from the actions of the first woman and man eating the apple of knowledge and 'falling' (that is, leaving the Garden of Eden). Despite comments in the Christian foundational books (the New Testament) about potential equality between women and men (e.g. Paul's comment that 'in Christ there is no male or female' (Galatians 4.28)), there are equally strong instructions for women to take a deferential role in church and in Christian community. What is more, the presence of a significant element of female-oriented worship in one particular Christian tradition, that of Mary amongst Catholics, is itself ambiguous, focusing women ideologically on a figure who combines the contradictory status of both mother and also pure virginal woman (without 'sin').

Many women in the past century have concluded from this that being a woman in Christian traditions can be difficult, if not impossible. Much of what has been taught and practised by the various churches has been largely based on a principle of male control and superiority over women. What is more, the political challenge by women of exclusive male political hierarchies and organisational control (such as the various movements to admit women into priesthood, other ministries, and into bishoprics) has most often met with strong opposition from the men who dominate these positions. Changes have been made in some Christian churches in recent decades, for example, some Anglican, Methodist, Baptist, and Presbyterian churches now have female priests/ministers. But there remains the uncomfortable question of why women still wish to stick around in traditions that have disadvantaged them so much in the past two millennia?

The response that there are many women who choose to remain Christians, despite these problems, may lead us to conclude that such women are effectively participating in their own oppression. Christian traditions do appear to provide a Lacanian male symbolic. There is a deep vein of androcentrism and phallocentrism in Christian ideologies where a male human-divine figure (Jesus), acting on the wishes of a male creator God, offers hope and promise of a better world, along with truth, wisdom, and salvation for both women and men. Access to this better world can only come, for most Christians, through acceptance of a political organisation that is dominated by men and male-centred values.

A more sophisticated analysis of ideology, deriving from writers such as Althusser or Gramsci, suggests some interesting readings we can make of the role of Christian religious traditions within the construction and maintenance of gender politics. In Gramscian terms, we can argue that male hegemonic culture has been largely internalised by women who, throughout Christian history, have participated in its practices. In terms of Althusser's notion of interpellation, women as subjects have become Christians through male ideological apparatuses (such as the churches, but also through institutions such as the family, schools, etc.), and in doing so have participated in an ideology which oppresses them.

Is this the case? Many Christian women may argue otherwise, that Christianity is not an ideology, but is in fact the way to the (ultimate) truth and so goes beyond such categories. In response one could argue that 'they would say that wouldn't they?' Someone in the grip of an ideology, or who has internalised a hegemony, is not able to step outside of it, indeed Althusser gives a rigid perspective in which it is almost impossible to step out of one's subject position. There are throughout the world (including in the USA and the UK) many millions of women who are happy to accept what could be called 'traditional' Christianity, including many of the androcentric and women-exclusive elements that I have mentioned. It might be possible to argue that such women are trapped in a male-dominated ideology, which they have internalised and which traps them into

gender inequality which impacts on many other areas of their lives.

For example, such women, and their husbands/fathers/brothers, may consider that a Christian woman's role in life should primarily focus on providing for the needs of her husband, bearing and raising his children, maintaining his household, etc., and thus being economically dependent on him. If this is combined with a religious injunction against effective contraception, the result will be Christian women spending large parts of their lives bearing and looking after many children, immersed physically and economically in a system which favours their husbands and their male relatives far more than them.

Against this, however, there are also now (since the second half of the twentieth century in particular), many women who have challenged such patriarchal assumptions. In particular feminist Christians have questioned the ideological basics of various Christian traditions, in many different ways. These include the maleness of God, the link between Jesus' maleness and priesthood/leadership, and in particular the link between traditional Christian models of social and family organisation and the opportunities (and gender politics) of the contemporary world. Despite conventional interpretations of Paul's and Jesus' teachings that designate women's 'place' as within the domestic sphere and predominantly motherhood, many contemporary women see no contradiction in being married, having a career, and deferring parenthood to a time that suits their interests (or forgoing it altogether), whilst also being a practising Christian. So, inasmuch as the various Christian traditions produce an ideology and hegemony that can be oppressive to women, there are definitely, at least in recent times, counter-hegemonic forms of feminist Christianity that profoundly challenge that ideology.

In line, however, with perspectives akin to Daly's and Irigaray's there are growing numbers of women (and men) in contemporary western cultures who are rejecting what they see as the inescapable patriarchy of Christian traditions, but still remaining religious. That is, although they accept that a feminist critique can (and should) be made of Christian androcentrism, this does not necessarily mean that the critique should be

extended as a blanket universal criticism of all religious traditions. This view tends to argue that it is traditional Christianity (and perhaps Judaism and Islam) which has constructed an ideology based on an oppressive father deity. But what they see as the reality behind the deity may be quite different from this. God as father may create patriarchy, but if women (and men) see god as mother, and more generally as female, then it is argued that this more inclusive deity becomes more accessible. As both Daly and Irigaray and many goddess worshippers also argue, the replacement of male god imagery with a female deity entails also the potential for a decline in the political oppression of women.

A remodelling of such goddess worship is a key component of the contemporary Neo-Pagan movement in a number of European countries (Harvey 1997; Salomonsen 2001). In these cases, inclusive goddess worship has been developed as a deliberate attempt to recreate a religion which is non-patriarchal and so is more socially and culturally egalitarian. This raises, however, the question of whether or not a goddess-centred type of religiosity is less patriarchal or androcentric than those which focus on images of singular male deities. Against this, case studies of Hinduism suggest that the worship of female deities (of whom there are many within the various Hindu traditions) does not necessarily create any more favourable economic, social, or cultural conditions for Hindu women (Erndl 1993). Indeed the notorious (and extremely rare) ideology of *sati* among certain Hindus is in fact tied (at one level) to women's devotion to a female deity (Hawley 1994; Harlan 1992).

Religion, gender, and agency

Some of these issues can be viewed from a different angle, using the concept of agency. That is, how individuals behave in spite of, and also because of, the social, cultural, and religious forces that act upon them. If someone is brought up in a rigorously religious background (for example, Baptist Christian, Orthodox Jewish, or otherwise), that does not necessarily mean they will themselves be religious in the same way as their family. Acting on their own individual agency a person can make choices – to

act in ways for which they have not been culturally programmed.

At this simple level it appears commonsensical: cultures and religions do not produce clones. Individuals have a role in shaping how they live out and practise the cultures (and religions) into which they have been raised. George W. Bush may not have grown up to be a Republican like his father, it was through his own agency that he made the decisions that finally led to him becoming the US President. Of course, there were many other larger forces at work too, such as the immense wealth of his family, the constraints of the cultural and party-political tradition which he had imbibed through his family, and other pressures from friends, colleagues, family, and from his own expectations of himself. There were many aspects of his own self-interest (in terms of personal, political, and economic gain) that encouraged him to choose the options that he did. But what the concept of agency does is to give room for understanding why not all people who grow up as sons of US Presidents themselves become Presidents. In contrast, one might ask a different set of questions about Chelsea Clinton. Whether or not she ever becomes president will also depend not only on her own agency – would she want to be a president or not – but also whether the social and cultural system will make it possible, when there has never been a woman president of the USA.

These examples suggest that ideology, and the cultures that produce that ideology, are not all-pervasive – they can be challenged on the individual basis. The existence of an ideology, through a particular religious tradition and culture, may not necessarily mean the acceptance of that ideology (and oppression) by the women in its influence. Structures, and ideologies, are there to be resisted – as Foucault argues: 'where there is power, there is resistance' (Foucault 1981). But is this simply wishful thinking? Is the idea of agency simply a product of the contemporary western idea of freedom of choice?

At its most simple, the idea of agency seems to be based on a loose assumption that, as Talal Asad puts it: 'power is external

to and repressive of the agent, that it 'subjects' her, and that nevertheless the agent as 'active subject' has both the desire to oppose power and the responsibility to become more powerful' (Asad 2000: 32). For Asad, this idea romanticises the idea of resistance, as something which is the 'natural' reaction for those oppressed by social and cultural forces.

Thus the agency concept is rather limited if it builds in an expectation of resistance: for example, that George W. should see the folly of his father's policies and become a Democrat, or that a girl raised in a restrictive Christian household can and should rebel and find a life path with which she is satisfied. Such expectations are often confounded by actual examples, such as the cases of women who do not challenge patriarchal religious groups, or of women who were brought up in liberal feminist families actively choosing to join 'traditional' or orthodox traditions in which their gender roles become much more narrowly defined (see, for example Kaufman 1991 on women converts to traditional Judaism, and Palmer 1994 on women joining traditional 'new religions'). The concept of agency should be useful to explain such choices too.

The tricky and unresolved balance depends on whether there is such a thing as a 'free choice', of whether any person can ever step completely outside of the culture, worldview, and religious ideology in which they were raised. There are genuine cases of conversion, when one worldview and lifestyle is exchanged for another, but even so there is still the idea that 'once a Catholic, always a Catholic'. The traditions, cultures, religions, and general social and political forces that one lives within have extremely powerful influences on us as individuals which are very hard to escape. Therefore, agency itself may not simply be a matter of free choice. A person's agency, how they relate to and act out the possibilities that are offered to them, is itself determined by the cultural and religious world in which they live. Culture and religion create a person's agency, and so agency is not a matter of stepping out of the culture – it is more of a matter of living for oneself within the confines of it.

The question of agency also raises another problem, particularly with regard to how we can understand the agency of the

actions of people who are not usually listened to, such as women. The Indian post-colonial theorist Gayatri Spivak (1993, 1999) describes this in terms of 'can the subaltern speak?' (the term 'subaltern' meaning here a group who are marginalised or excluded). That is, social organisation and academic study have tended to be so androcentric that it is nearly impossible to find a way of hearing the voices of women in the past, particularly women without power. Historical records, literary sources, religious texts, and oral traditions all seem to speak volumes in their silence about women and women's experiences in the past. The descriptions of women in such texts often present them one-dimensionally (as people who are acted upon, rather than people who act, with agency) and without any voice of their own (usually a male narrator speaking for them, or neglecting to report their speech). Indeed, writing on reconstructing the experiences of women in colonial India, Spivak argues that in the end the subaltern cannot speak, or what she might have said (being passed on to us through history) cannot be heard. At the very least, we need to find new ways of listening to what she (or he) may be saying (Spivak 1999).

From this develops, then, the difficult question of how we listen to women's (and other marginal groups' and individuals') voices within the study of religion and culture? If women and men are active participants in, and against, the ideologies and religious practices of their cultures, then in what ways does this agency help to shape, and resist, cultures and religions? There are, of course, no straightforward answers to these questions. What they give are means to try to understand the particularities of specific cases. In fact, the concept of agency versus ideology and tradition should make us sensitive to the fact that generalisations are always going to be difficult. It then becomes difficult to say something general such as 'religion is bad for women', or 'Muslim (or Christian or Hindu) women are oppressed'. What becomes more important is *how* a religious culture may play a significant role in subjugating and oppressing women (and others) in a particular context.

'Veiled' Muslim women

Of the many examples used in studies of women and religion, the one that raises most discussion is the question of women's social and political roles within Muslim traditions. There is a very commonly held assumption that Islam is oppressive of women – as evidenced by specific practices, such as the covering of women's heads, faces, and bodies, and the usually strict social separation between women and men in Muslim daily life. To highlight this, examples can be taken – particularly of the Taliban in Afghanistan, as well as a number of other Muslim states and societies – which clearly show that the strict application of certain Muslim teachings can work in very close parallel with repressive patriarchy.

Even so, it is very easy to over-generalise and so to miss some important local and historical details that are important to the particular context. To start with, there are important distinctions to be made between clothes that almost totally cover both face and head (such as the *burqa* in Afghanistan, and the *niqab* in Saudi Arabia), to the headscarf (*hijab*) that is a much more common form of dress for Muslim women (see Roald 2001: 254–94). Furthermore, it is possible to argue an alternative (or complementary) view that the wearing of either a scarf (*hijab*) or veil (*niqab*) can be a counter-hegemonic strategy, as a means of women's resistance against patriarchy rather than, or as well as, being subjected to it. In this sense, perhaps we can say that these clothes sometimes create a space for women. Although the 'veil', and what it stands for, is in some respects defined in terms of men's values what it actually creates is also largely outside of male control.

Looking at arguments in the specific context of Egypt, Leila Ahmed (1992) points out some of the issues behind why western observers choose to focus on the veil and Islam. Thus the first criticisms of the veil as the symbol of oppression were raised at the time of British colonial rule in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, by figures who could hardly be called 'feminists'. Ahmed singles out in particular Lord Cromer, British consul general in Egypt, who argued that

the degradation of women in the East is a canker that begins its destructive work early in childhood, and has eaten into the whole system of Islam ... [The practice of veiling] a baneful effect ... The arguments in the case are, indeed, so commonplace that it is unnecessary to dwell on them.

(Lord Cromer, *Modern Egypt* (1908),
quoted in Ahmed 1992: 152–3)

As Ahmed points out, however, this same would-be emancipator of Muslim women in Egypt was also, at home in Britain, one of the principal agitators *against* women's suffrage (that is, against extending voting rights to women). Cromer did, in fact, pursue policies in Egypt that prevented the expansion of women's education, and discouraged the training of women doctors. What Ahmed concludes is that colonialists such as Cromer (and subsequent generations) were using their critique of the veil as a means to substitute 'the garb of Islamic-style male dominance for that of Western-style male dominance' (1992: 161). Thus she argues:

The idea (which still often informs discussions about women in Arab and Muslim cultures ...) that improving the status of women entails abandoning native customs [such as wearing the veil] was the product of a particular historical moment [of British colonialism] and was constructed by an androcentric colonial establishment committed to male dominance.

(Ahmed 1992: 165)

What this brief historical example suggests, perhaps, is that there are varied and complex reasons why the veil in particular is emphasised by westerners. Although it can be an expression of patriarchal social relations, a critique of the veil may be motivated by equally androcentric factors, especially one that says Muslim women should give up the veil along with other aspects of their culture.

In the context of Egypt in the late twentieth century, Hala Shukrallah (1994) explores the possible reasons why Muslim women do 'still' wear the veil, or more correctly the *hijab* headscarf. First, she notes that women are often given the task of symbolically representing traditional values. That is, women rather than men have the responsibility for upholding decency, Islamic values, and morals in times of rapid social, economic, and cultural change. Hence, 'decent' behaviour by women, such as the wearing of 'proper' and modest Islamic dress, becomes imperative not only for the women themselves, but for the sake of society as a whole, both women and men.

Despite this, critics such as Cromer, as well as Egyptian feminists, led to many Egyptian (particularly middle-class) women rejecting the veil. However, in more recent years (particularly the last two decades) analysts have observed that *hijab* has again become very prominent among such women. It cannot simply be argued that the renewed popularity of *hijab* is a sign of increased traditionalisation of women, nor of greater exploitation or subordination of Egyptian women. On the contrary, there are now *more* women working in paid employment, earning their own incomes, as well as women participating in higher education at college and university level. In fact, the wearing of *hijab* by many women has been in direct response to the challenges entailed by their increased participation in the public (non-domestic) sphere. Thus, Shukrallah points out, the previously traditional distinction between women as home-makers and keepers in the private sphere, and men as those who enter the public domain for work, has somewhat broken down. Increasingly large numbers of women are now in the previously male-dominated public domain.

It is this fundamental social change that has prompted the increased wearing of *hijab*. On one level, by covering themselves women have made it easier to enter the male/public domain without engendering conflict. *Hijab* minimises the conflict, but does not completely prevent it. There are still many male religious leaders who resist this greater prominence of women in public roles, even though in doing so the women have taken up the symbols of traditional gender relations. For the women,

however, *hijab* has also been largely used to resist another element of male political control – as a means of protecting themselves from the potential of male sexual harassment. Covering the head may publicly show a woman to be modest and Islamic, whilst its absence means the woman is exposed to the male gaze as an object of sexual desire.

For Shukrallah, therefore, the increased use of *hijab* in modern Egypt is serving a number of gender political functions. It has become a specific cultural (and religious) option to facilitate women's adaptations to cultural changes – changes of their own making, such as working outside the home in greater numbers. It has also been used as a strategy within the complex gender dynamics specific to the area and the culture, providing a means of resisting and also participating in male attempts to control them. As she concludes, Egyptian 'women have, by donning the new veil, made a statement that both expresses protest and consent at the same time' (Shukrallah 1994 [2001: 195]).

Of course, we must remember that this does not explain 'why' many Muslim women wear *hijab* (beyond the specific context of the women in Egypt discussed by Shukrallah). Nor does it fully explore the ways in which head covering, and the religious ideas and practices associated with it, are produced by the gender political relations between women and men in various Muslim cultures. The wearing of *hijab* by Muslim women in the USA or the UK may be for very different reasons. For example, in this context *hijab* may not only express a challenge of Muslim male control of their activities, as in the Egyptian case, but it may also be used as a form of resistance to the dominant (hegemonic) non-Muslim American or British culture.

Writing on British Muslim women, Myfanwy Franks (2001) suggests that the argument over whether *hijab* is oppressive or not misses the point. Instead, she encourages us 'to recognize that women can and do make subversive and feminist readings of patriarchal discourses', and that 'what is collusion in one context may be viewed as resistance in another' (Franks 2001: 130). In fact, there are various levels of ambiguity in the use of *hijab* which are not easily resolved. For example, head covering

makes a clear public statement that its wearer is a good Muslim, even to the extent – as one woman told Franks – that she is ‘more Islamic than her husband’ (2001: 143). On the other hand, *hijab* marks out its wearer for attention among non-Muslims, attention which can go as far as abuse and violence against the Muslim woman ‘for not revealing enough of her body’ (2001: 138). In this respect, the covering then becomes a critique of non-Muslim gender relations. Indeed, if we return to Foucault’s idea of power as surveillance (as discussed in the previous chapter), we can argue that a woman who wears both *hijab* and a face-veil is challenging the everyday panoptical power of the male, patriarchal gaze. This male gaze (of power) cannot see past ‘the veil’, and instead the Muslim woman becomes the only one who can survey, rather than being under surveillance.

I have raised these interpretations of women and *hijab* in Islam in order to demonstrate the limitations of any particular explanation. Head covering, as a part of the cultural apparatus of many Muslims, does not necessarily create or reflect any single and particular form of power relations. Although there is a strong element of the wearing of *hijab* by Muslim women that comes out of patriarchal, male-dominated gender relations, the act of wearing may equally be charged with a challenge to such patriarchy. A gender-critical analysis of this particular form of religious practice helps us to understand that there are considerable ambiguities about the *hijab*’s use and meaning.

Gender-nuanced studies of religion and culture

A gender-critical perspective is not only about looking at how religions and cultures act in oppressive ways upon women. The relatively recent development of feminist and gender-critical scholarship means that serious questions can be asked about the ways in which ‘traditional’ studies have been carried out. For example, what sorts of expectations have been made in previous studies that have concentrated on male viewpoints and activities, and left out or marginalised women? What sorts of things have been said about religion and religions in general, which more particularly relate to the activities of a few powerful men? And

to develop this further, how should more gender-critical studies of religion be done?

In the next three chapters I will be developing some of these ideas, to show some of the strengths and weaknesses of focusing studies of religion on belief, rituals, and texts. Indeed, so much research and debate has been conducted on religious beliefs and texts, that it seems there has been little time taken by previous generations of scholars to point out how texts are often profoundly androcentric. After all, the books of the Bible were all written by men, have been translated into English by men, and are usually publicly interpreted by men also. The books contain stories and accounts of various women’s (as well as men’s) lives, and have been used, in many ways, by women over the millennia. A study of a religion, however, that concentrates solely on the texts themselves and how the text should be understood in terms of its authors and its intended meaning is seriously in danger of missing the point. That is, the ways in which the text is used within the religious and cultural lives of women, as well as men, cannot be reconstructed and understood so easily. Instead, such a text tells us something of the religious practices and concerns of certain men, but that is about it.

In contrast then, studies of religion have to look in different places for the broad range of activities that could be designated as ‘religious’ within any particular context. A focus on beliefs, and other types of texts (not only ‘sacred texts’, but also more ‘popular’ or informal ones) may help us find readings and perspectives of women as well as men. Susan Starr Sered’s (1994) discussion of prominent women figures in several religious traditions also draws attention to a number of areas in which women’s religious traditions are located. Her focus is on women’s particular experiences, whatever they may be, as sources for the development of religious ideas and practices. This may be through domestic experiences, particular life-cycles, or women-focused social networks.

From the perspective of mainstream religious institutions, such as churches, these experiences and networks may produce practices and discourses which are not orthodox or ‘proper’. Indeed, in some cases religious cultures associated with women

may provide a counter-hegemonic challenge for 'orthodoxy' or mainstream religious practice, but in other cases they may be part of such orthodoxy. An example of the latter can be found in Callum Brown's (2001) analysis of female piety as the mainstay of Protestantism in Britain in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (which I will discuss in more detail in Chapter 8). Indeed, for Brown the collapse of such female religious practice in the 1960s has led to an overall decline of cultural Christian practice and ideology in contemporary Britain.

Finally, however, I would like to return to the point made by Joan Scott (1986) that I quoted at the beginning of this chapter. As I have shown, gender is a very important category of analysis for the study of religion and culture. Alongside this, however, we should not lose sight of the fact that, as Scott herself argues, there are other categories of difference as well as gender – such as race, class, ethnicity, age, and sexuality – which cross-cut the lines of difference set up by the male–female distinction (see Maynard 1994).

One small illustration of this is the problems raised by the application of feminist thinking beyond western cultural locations. It is possible to argue that western feminism has imposed an idea of 'women' on to non-western cultures, and then faced problems with the perspectives that such an imposition produces. The case of Muslim women is a good example of this – it could be argued that western feminists do not really know 'what to do' with Muslim women who are happy with their cultural and religious traditions. There are indeed many feminist Muslim women, who engage as feminists with women in western countries and elsewhere. But they are outnumbered by others who consider their religious (e.g. Muslim) and cultural (e.g. Arabic, or South Asian, etc.) identities as more important than their gender.

One response to this is the development of *womanism* rather than feminism – a theoretical and political stance that extends to 'women of colour', beyond the confines of what is otherwise a politically (and economically) elite group of white women in rich western countries (see, for example Walker 1983; hooks 1982). Such a distinction raises two further categories of difference:

race or ethnicity, and class. Much womanism in north America is directed at the 'colour blindness' of white feminists, who fail to see the important issues of racial and economic disadvantage as well as issues of gender.

What was often known as 'third wave' feminism in the 1990s has led to a re-evaluation of some of the complexities of these issues. 'First wave' feminism saw a small number of elite women in the west begin to challenge the dominance of patriarchy in the nineteenth century, and 'second wave' feminism was the much wider explosion of feminist scholarship and activism in the west, and elsewhere, in the 1960s and 1970s (see Juschka 2001: 3–9). Although it could be said that 'second wave' feminism is still in the process of developing, it has been largely superseded by the 'third wave' that offers a more cross-cultural set of perspectives that place the category of gender within the framework of other categories of differences. Gender is an important aspect of cultural and religious practice, but so also are differences based on class, race, power, age, sexuality, and location. Studies of religion and culture require a broad-based approach which assumes this premise of diversity – that religions are products of the politics of such differences, and are experienced through the particular lenses of people who are shaped (in their different ways) by their own particular combinations of identities.

Summary

- Studies of religion need to be gender critical. Indeed, gender is a very important category of difference, as a key element of the practice and ideology of power differences in many cultures.
- Gender critical studies need to look at how religious cultures are constructed and practised around both women *and* men. However, a central problematic about the study of religion and culture remains focused on questions of women's experiences of religion.

- Western perceptions of women in other religions – such as women in Islam – require a subtle and carefully examined exploration of the politics of religious behaviour, such as the wearing of *hijab*, i.e. 'the veil'.
- Such an analysis also needs to recognise other aspects of difference, such as 'race', class, ethnicity, age, and sexuality, which are all important social elements that affect religious and cultural practices.

Suggestions for further reading

An excellent starting point for the study of religion and gender is the recent reader edited by Darlene Juschka called *Feminism in the Study of Religion: A Reader* (2001). It contains a wide range of essays, a number of which are mentioned in this chapter. Juschka's introduction sets out the history of feminist thinking very concisely and covers the main issues in the growth of feminist studies of religion. Another good collection of articles is Ursula King, *Religion and Gender* (1995), which also has a very useful introduction.

Other recent articles on the field of gender and religion are: Daniel Boyarin, 'Gender' (1998); and Randi Warne, 'Gender' (2000). Mary Keller's *The Hammer and the Flute: Women, Power, and Spirit Possession* (2002) provides some excellent discussion on contemporary issues in the study of religion, gender, and agency. See also Linda Woodhead, 'Women and Religion' (*Religions in the Modern World*, Routledge 2002). On issues of religion and gender in a post-colonial context see Laura E. Donaldson and Kwok Pui-Lan, *Postcolonialism, Feminism, and Religious Discourse* (2002).

For a very useful discussion of the complexities of contemporary debates on gender, sex, and sexuality, see Henrietta Moore, 'Whatever happened to women and men? Gender and other crises in anthropology' (*Anthropological Theory Today* 1999). Christine Delphy's article on 'Rethinking Sex and Gender'

(1993) is reprinted in the Darlene Juschka *Reader*, whilst for the very strong-hearted, Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990) makes a very challenging read (in more ways than one). The volume edited by Gary David Comstock and Susan E. Henking, *Que(e)rying religion: A Critical Anthology* (1997) provides some good articles on issues arising from the application of queer theory to the study of religion and culture.

For studies of religion and gender with regard to specific religious traditions, some useful starting points are: on Islam, Anne-Sofie Roald, *Women in Islam* (2001); and Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam* (1992). On Hinduism, Julia Leslie, *Roles and Rituals for Hindu Women* (1991). On Buddhism, Rita Gross, *Buddhism after Patriarchy* (1993). And on New/Alternative Religions, Elizabeth Puttick, *Women and New Religions* (1997); and Susan Palmer, *Moon Sisters, Krishna Mothers, Rajneesh Lovers: Women's Roles in New Religions* (1994).