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Introduction

THIS BOOK SURVEYS the issues that have been central to feminism and religion over the past twenty-five years. In my view, two agendas are crucial to this task. First, it is important, insofar as possible, to discuss feminism and the entire scope of *religion*, not just Christian and post-Christian feminist theology, which so often happens in books on women and religion. Properly pursued, the field of religious studies involves study of all major religions found in human history, not merely the culturally familiar perspectives of Christianity and, possibly, Judaism. Presenting both the information about women's roles in all these religions as well as a feminist perspective on each of them is an immense undertaking.

Second, combining the study of feminism and religion requires making an important distinction between descriptive and normative approaches to religion. Unlike most other feminist treatments of religion, this book discusses religion both descriptively and normatively, rather than confining itself to one approach. I will also explore the feminist *study* of religion: what happens when feminist academic methods are applied to the data studied by scholars of religion. But I will also discuss what happens when feminists bring normative concerns to religion, when they critique and reconstruct their religions from the point of view of feminist values.

Because both religion and feminism are complex and emotion-

laden topics, this book begins with definitions. Chapter one defines and discusses feminism, religion, and religious studies, as well as the relationships between them. In this chapter, we will face several controversial and difficult issues surrounding the entanglement of academic knowledge and personal life choices, which can be especially keen in the intersection of feminism and religion. Chapter two offers a brief historical sketch of the interactions between feminism and religion, introducing some of the major players and issues. It begins with a discussion of the nineteenth-century background to the current women's movement and continues with surveys of feminist movements in various religions and the major trends and thinkers in the feminist academic study of religion.

The rest of this book addresses four central issues for feminism and religion. The first concerns the imperative to include information about women in all descriptions of religion, discussed in chapter three. The second issue is more controversial, even among feminists: Are the world's major religions inevitably sexist and disadvantageous to women, or are they inherently egalitarian and reformable, despite their patriarchal veneers? Chapter four then questions whether religions post the sign "No Girls Allowed" at the entrances to their most hallowed sanctuaries. Attempts to answer this question have led to the third major issue in feminist scholarship: Once we rid ourselves of androcentric methodologies and patriarchal assumptions, it is necessary and instructive to "reread" the past, asking "Has It Always Been That Way?"—the title of chapter five. The final major concern of feminist scholars and theologians, addressed in chapter six, is speculative and future-oriented, concerning the forms of postpatriarchal religion. Thus this book deals with what Buddhists call the "three times": past, present, and future. Throughout, I have endeavored to balance attention to feminist studies of religion and feminist transformations of religion.

I write this book as someone who has been involved in both the feminist study and the feminist transformation of religion throughout my career. I can list many "firsts" in my own record, including the fact that I was one of the first to insist on methodological self-declarations like this one. I wrote the first dissertation on feminism and religious studies, the first article on female God-language in Judaism, and the first major feminist analysis of a non-Western religion. I also coedited the first comprehensive book about women's religious lives in cross-cultural perspective.

My involvement in these ventures colors my reporting on them. Those with a different perspective might include materials I have omitted and omit perspectives I have included. Since my training is in the cross-cultural study of religion, and because I am personally involved in a major non-Western tradition, I constantly strive to redress the imbalance and Eurocentrism of current feminist and neofeminist perspectives on religion. In my view, the Western orientation of most feminist thinking about religion is a serious limitation. In this book, I omit some of the fine-tuning in Christian and Jewish feminist discussions in order to include more material on the cross-cultural study of women and religion and on non-Christian and non-Western feminism. Clearly, chief among my methodological biases is the conviction that relevant thinking can no longer afford the luxury of Eurocentrism. Therefore, the great intellectual and spiritual systems of Asia, as well as the many indigenous traditions throughout the world, play into my outlook and are represented in this book.

In keeping with the cross-cultural nature of the discipline of religious studies, I will always discuss at least one major Western religion and one other major religion in each of the four central chapters. The Western religion most frequently discussed will be Christianity, both because Christian feminist scholarship and theology are extremely well developed and because so many who will use this book come from a Christian background. The non-

Western religion most frequently discussed will be Buddhism, both because it presents significant contrasts to and similarities with Christianity and because it is Christianity's most significant partner in interreligious dialogue and interchange. Furthermore, though feminist perspectives are less developed in Buddhism than in Christianity, they are more developed in Buddhism than in other Asian or non-Western traditions.

Defining Feminism, Religion, and the Study of Religion

BOTH FEMINISM AND RELIGION are academic subjects taught at most colleges and universities. But they are also controversial, emotion-laden systems of belief that directly affect people's lives. Those just beginning formal study of women and religion often already have strong emotional, prereflective opinions about both religion and feminism, and many who teach about them are themselves personally involved in writing feminist theology or practicing a feminist form of religion. Because both teachers and students may come to the study of religion and feminism with strong emotional convictions and commitments, academic study of either topic can be particularly challenging.

Even without the complicating factor of feminism, the academic study of religion can often feel threatening, in part because the distinction between the study of religion as an academic discipline and the personal practice of religion is not often made in our culture. Therefore, the academic study of religion challenges one's personal beliefs more than the study of other academic subjects.

Likewise the study of feminism or the use of feminist methods can be disconcerting to those new to feminism, particularly because media stereotypes about feminism seldom accurately describe feminists' concerns. To ease this transition to thinking about topics often charged with strong feelings and loyalties, this book begins