

# Continuities and Departures: Women's Religious and Spiritual Leadership

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This special issue of the *Journal for the Study of Religion* is dedicated to exploring the continuities and departures of women's theorising, theologising, and philosophising with respect to women's religious and spiritual leadership. Accordingly, the papers included in this special issue are reflective of some of the poignant critiques raised by controversial foremothers – which continue, to various extents, to inform ongoing debates on women's religious and spiritual leadership. The most obvious enduring critique is that of patriarchy's refusal to recognise women as equal religious subjects.

Simultaneously, the contributions are also reflective of the situated and localised knowledge that arises from personal and collective trajectories, multi-layered feminist standpoints, and commitments to continue to challenge methodological, theological, and theoretical perspectives, feminist or otherwise. Hence, the diverse contributions in this special issue render visible some of the similarities and convergences that continue to mould the critical field of scholarship and activism in the area of women's full participation in religious discourses, while also foregrounding the distinct, diverging, and innovative voices that invite us to imagine new possibilities of women's theorising, theologising, and philosophising.

Women scholars in religious studies have produced notable and inspiring accounts of women's religious and spiritual leadership across a range of historical and new religious traditions and movements (see Eller 1993; Goldenberg 1979; Palmer 1994; Sered 1994; and Ngunjiri 2010). Using a

variety of methodological approaches and theoretical perspectives, at times informed by distinct feminist positions and commitments, women scholars in religious studies have critiqued the gendered politics of religious inclusion and exclusion (see Alpert 1997; Daly 1973; and Gross 1993). Highlighting women's experiences, understandings, and participation (or lack thereof) in religious discourses by "rereading", "reconceiving", and "reconstructing" (O'Connor 1989) dominant religious *histories*, women scholars in religion present empowering and liberatory counter-narratives that effectively expose and destabilise patriarchal and heteronormative accounts of women's natures, roles, and capacities.

Although religious leadership continues to be reflective of male hegemony in many religious discourses, women are increasingly occupying positions of authority and leadership within various Christian denominations, attaining posts such as those of priests and bishops in Protestantism; priestesses and prophetesses in African Initiated Churches; rabbis in Reform Judaism; and *gurus* and spiritual teachers in Hinduism and Buddhism. In the modern- and postmodern eras, women have initiated and founded new religious movements, such as the feminist spirituality movement, which abandon traditional hierarchies, institutional structures, and the notorious notion of a he-God in favour of egalitarian, gynocentric, and goddess-centred ritual practices (see Plaskow and Christ 1989; and Starhawk 1979).

Despite these women-affirming and inclusive developments, women scholars in religion have also exposed women's continued exclusion and absence from positions of religious leadership — visibly demonstrating that the self-proclaimed custodians (read: male patriarchs) of religious traditions continue in the present to preserve and protect *history*. It is in the continuing parochial stitching of *history* that the decided lack of *herstory* becomes most glaring.

Many archetypal narratives, including that of Adam and Eve and the "fall from grace", present fecund ground for the feminist. Traditionally, selective exegetical readings of the doctrinal architecture of various religions have been translated into rules and laws that have worked to exclude women. These power regimes came to be profoundly embedded in the sociology of women's (non-)participation, and have tabooed and distanced women from vital aspects of many religions. One of the particular issues that androcentric exegetes have commonly pronounced upon has been women's sexual difference from that of men — which, ostensibly, "naturally" stimulates the production of asymmetrical gender roles. Deprecating assumptions pertaining to women's bodies, sexuality, reproductive capacities — and, let us not forget, their provocative bleeding — have generated a multitude of exclusionary religious beliefs and practices.

Women's exclusion is constructed and narrativised even prior to conception. We are reminded of the classic paper by anthropologist Emily Martin (1991) in which she deliciously unknots how science (which itself often has been deified) has romanticised what she terms the "scientific fairy tale of the egg and sperm". Martin's paper is not without justification. Many of us cannot but recall memories of gendered high school lessons on reproduction, replete with stories of how the egg sits and waits passively as a receptor for that one singular heroic/virile sperm to penetrate it. The scientific narrative depicts it/him as having swum bravely upstream and, in successfully managing to burrow into her/the egg, triumphantly initiates new life. This masculinist tradition of assigning active power to the male while rendering the female docile – or more euphemistically, "soft" and "gentle" – is thus not merely signification ascribed from the proverbial cradle to grave. As Martin reveals, it is embedded within scientific descriptions of the sperm and egg themselves! For Martin (1991: 485), the imagery surrounding the "egg and sperm drawn in popular as well as scientific accounts of reproductive biology, relies on stereotypes central to our cultural definitions of male and female". Such a gendered definition also extends into various religious institutional scaffoldings through doctrine, myth, symbol, and imagery, and works to deny women a rightful place and space in religion and religious structures, displacing women to the impoverished margins.

The title of Ruth Wallace's (see Wallace 2000: 497) 1975 address highlighted this marginalisation: "Bringing Women In: Marginality in the Churches". Twenty years later her presidential address at the 1995 meeting of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion was provocatively titled, "The Mosaic of Research on Religion: Where Are the Women?" (ibid.). Here, she argued that particular theoretical blind spots had contributed to the gender gap in research on religion. She suggested that the work of feminist theorists could help to correct the male-biased perspective of social science researchers.

While it is unfortunate that, as mentioned, not enough has changed regarding the (re)positioning of women from the periphery to the centre as it pertains to women in positions of religious leadership, much has changed regarding both critical feminist scholarship on religion and critical feminist praxis within religions. Many women scholars in religion have pointed out the glaringly obvious tensions between the various ways in which religious teachings are understood and how these teachings are embodied, enacted, and performed in various religious lifeworlds. Wendy Cadge points out that:

[i]n the Muslim tradition, for example, these tensions are evident when Muslim leaders teach that women and

men are equally able to practice Islam but only men are permitted inside of some mosques. In Hindu temples, these tensions are evident when women present the teachings in more gender-equitable ways to children ... but [it is] not allowed for women to occupy all of the leadership positions that these teachings indirectly suggest they should. These tensions are often implicit, rather than explicit. (Cadge 2004: 778)

This special issue is a tribute to those women who have had the tenacity to challenge hegemonic orthopraxis in both theory and action, both within institutional, clerical, and ecclesiastical structures and in their vital, routinised, everyday religious encounters. These women have in turn contributed to a substantive and liberatory feminism. The special issue confronts the critical question of women's exclusion from overt leadership roles within mainstream/malestream religions by calling for theoretical and empirical contributions to such interrogations.

In calling for contributions for this special issue, we wanted to solicit papers that would be recognisably and normatively academic and critical, as well as alternatively styled and scribed. We sought out richly reflective pieces by women who spoke critically from the emic *inside*. The papers included here thus capture personal journeys and observations that contest and disrupt what is experienced as a form of extreme Othering and attempts at silencing within authors' particular religious, clerical, and ecclesiastical structures. Aware that Othering (in this instance, gendered Othering) often attempts to violently mute alternative or unorthodox voices and ways of being, this issue has therefore sought to invite personally positioned scholarship on women and religious leadership alongside academic papers.

Thus we begin this special issue with an essay by **Azila Talit Reisenberger** entitled "On the Seam between Spirituality and Activism". Providing an autobiographical account that deeply coheres with the feminist notion of "writing-back", Reisenberger allows us to accompany her on her personal journey. As she interrogates her own sense of "being Jewish", we are invited to walk alongside her as she comes to assume a natural robing of her religious identity and assumes the leadership of a Progressive Jewish community in East London, South Africa. Her embodied narrative speaks directly to issues of women's exclusion from certain aspects of the Jewish faith and gives us a window into her experiences with clerical orthodoxy.

**Nina Hoel's** paper, "Sexualising the Sacred, Sacralising Sexuality: An Analysis of Public Responses to Muslim Women's Religious Leadership in the Context of a Cape Town Mosque", plugs us into a wider discourse that unpacks

the messily entangled notions of religion and women's sexuality. Situating this wider discourse within a local empirical context, her paper analyses the discourses of sexuality that emerged in the wake of Amina Wadud's delivery of the Friday sermon in a Cape Town mosque in 1994, and provides us with insightful Islamic feminist perspectives on women's religious leadership in Islam.

The essay "Transgressive Subversions? Female Religious Leaders in Hinduism", by **Maheshvari Naidu**, applies to her subject the theoretical lens of intertextuality. Critically engaging particular ethnographies of Hindu women as teachers and religious/spiritual leaders, she attempts to explore whether the examples of women in the Hindu tradition are transgressive, or whether they work instead to discursively and differently perpetuate particular parochial and masculinised social constructions of "woman". Her paper illustrates that even when we are shown examples of female spiritual leaders or *gurus*, we are still left confronting idioms and articulations of maternal and feminine vocabularies, rather than actual subversions of Hindu traditions.

**Eliza Getman and Sarojini Nadar's** essay, "Natality and Motherism: Embodiment within Praxis of Spiritual Leadership" foregrounds the significance and contribution of giving birth and mothering in and to the hegemonic context of an otherwise male ministry. They suggest that birthing and mothering practices and reflections offer a fertile ground for developing an innovative conceptual framework that may yield feminist conceptualisations on women's religious leadership within doctrinal and traditional frameworks. By artfully juxtaposing *natality* and *mortality*, they argue that such a re-ordering can fruitfully point the way to not only transformed constructions of humanity, but also to transformed conceptions about God.

We are privileged to include a contribution by the internationally renowned feminist theologian **Mary E. Hunt**, provocatively entitled "The Evolution and Revolution of Feminist Ministry: A U.S. Catholic Perspective". Hunt provides a personal and critical reflection on Catholic women's determination and spirited efforts to occupy positions of religious leadership in the U.S. context. Through a critical feminist lens she offers us a panoramic view of the historical processes that unfolded and gave rise to the diverse and vibrant practices of U.S. feminist ministry.

**Elaine Nogueira-Godsey's** essay, "A History of Resistance: Ivone Gebara's Transformative Feminist Liberation Theology", takes us on a journey to Latin America, where pioneering liberation theologian Gebara's personal search for liberation and her understanding of the theological task have profoundly informed the development of feminist liberation theology – and later,

ecofeminist perspectives — in Latin America and beyond. Nogueira-Godsey evocatively entwines Gebara's biographical narratives with her emerging "lived liberation" theology, and shows how this crucial nexus has contributed to the development of Gebara's "on-the-move" methodology and feminist theological vision.

We round off this special issue with **Robyn Henderson-Espinoza's** paper, "Gloria Anzaldúa's *El Mundo Zurdo*: Exploring a Relational Feminist Theology of Interconnectedness". Henderson-Espinoza's paper is a rich theoretical and philosophical engagement with Chicana queer feminist theorist Gloria Anzaldúa's work. Pointing out that Anzaldúa's relational feminist theology fosters resourceful ways in which to critically reflect on feminist standpoint epistemology and ontology, Henderson-Espinoza highlights the material dimensions of the body as important sites for continued feminist reflections on theology. While Anzaldúa is more a philosopher than a religious leader, her place in this special issue speaks to a feminist notion of interconnectedness that is relational, and that transcends discursively constructed difference and male-female power hierarchies. Unlike masculinised orthopraxis and leadership, this Anzaldúan relationality strikes us as a valuable architectural brick in the evolving structures of female religious and spiritual leadership.

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