

# Religion, Gender, and Change

## *A Critical Feminist Exploration*<sup>1</sup>

In this chapter I discuss the encoding of gender discourses and their religious legitimizations. I argue that a critical academic analysis of gender need to remain rooted in the variegated social wo/men's movements for change. Critical liberationist feminist studies in religion and Christian the\*logy therefore may not only focus on a critical deconstructive gender<sup>2</sup> analysis but may also seek to develop religious and spiritual resources and visions that empower wo/men in religion for change and transformation.

In a global situation of venture capitalism, poverty, and information highways, all religions are challenged to articulate a liberating spiritual vision of justice and well-being for everyone. In order to speak to this global situation of increasing insecurity and exploitation that challenges all universal claims to justice and liberation we need to recognize and affirm that we all are in the same fragile global "life-boat" called earth. In attempting to articulate a spiritual vision of well-being for all, it is especially necessary to focus on the struggles of wo/men at the bottom of the global pyramids of domination and to unearth the subjugated knowledges of every woman around the globe.

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1. This chapter has appeared only in Chinese in *The Dance of Interpretation*, ed. Yeh Pao-Kuei (Taipei: Yeon Wang, 2007).

2. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "Gender," in *The Encyclopedia of Politics and Religion*, ed. Robert Wuthnow (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Books, 1998), 290-94. See also Hadumod Bussman and Renate Hof, eds., *Genus: Zur Geschlechterdifferenz in den Kulturwissenschaften* (Stuttgart: Kröner, 1995); Linda Nicholson, "Interpreting Gender," in *Social Postmodernism: Beyond Identity Politics*, ed. Linda Nicholson and Steven Seidman (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 39-67. See also the work of Judith Butler.

Feminist liberation theologies and movements therefore seek to weave together the heterogeneous strands of emancipatory visions of the world's religions into the multicolored tapestry of ethical-religious spiritual vision. They invite religious people to rediscover and affirm spiritual traditions of human dignity, justice, inclusivity, diversity, and the richness of creation. In my reflections I will attempt to address some of these questions not just from a feminist perspective but from a Christian feminist the\*logical<sup>3</sup> perspective. I explore the topic as a Catholic feminist the\*logian<sup>4</sup> from an Euro-American social location who understands the specific struggles of Christian wo/men as similar to those in other religions. If I focus on Christian religion and the\*logy as sites of feminist struggles, I do not mean to suggest that only Christian churches and the\*logies are such sites of feminist ideology critique and transformation. To the contrary, similar issues are raised by feminists in Judaism and Islam, the other two biblical religions.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, other major world religions also are undergoing intense feminist scrutiny and re-visioning of their belief systems and institutional practices.<sup>6</sup>

The second wave of the feminist movement has not only engendered a wo/men's rights movement in religion. It has also inaugurated feminist studies in religion and the\*logy as new academic areas of research and inquiry.<sup>7</sup> Feminist studies in religion and the\*logy have broken through the silencing of centuries and have begun to reclaim the sacred power of naming. They have begun to name the divine, the world, and the Self anew.<sup>8</sup>

In short, I approach the topic from a critical feminist perspective and practice that seeks to change Christian religion. I will argue first that the problem of religious culture and gender ethics needs to be negotiated within a critical feminist framework that is rooted in feminist movements for change, because feminists have

3. In order to indicate the brokenness and inadequacy of human language to name the divine, I have switched in my book *Jesus: Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet: Critical Issues in Feminist Christology* (New York: Continuum, 1994) from the orthodox Jewish writing of G-d, which I had adopted in *But She Said* and *Discipleship of Equals*, to this spelling of G\*d, which seeks to avoid the conservative malestream association that the writing of G-d has for Jewish feminists. Since the\*logy means speaking about G\*d or G\*d-talk, I write it in the same way.

4. See my book *Grenzen überschreiten: Der theoretische Anspruch feministischer Theologie* (Münster: LIT, 2004).

5. For a widely-discussed example of such a dialogue between wo/men in the three biblical religions, see Ranya Idliby, Suzanne Oliver, and Priscilla Warner, *The Faith Club: A Muslim, A Christian, A Jew—Three Women's Search for Understanding* (New York: Free, 2006). For a more scholarly dialogue, see Rita M. Gross and Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Religious Feminism and the Future of the Planet: A Buddhist-Christian Conversation* (New York: Continuum, 2001).

6. See the excellent contributions in Paula M. Coe, William R. Eakin, and Jay B. McDaniel, eds., *After Patriarchy: Feminist Transformations of the World Religions* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991).

7. *The Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, which I cofounded with the Jewish feminist Judith Plaskow, has provided a forum for such interreligious and interdisciplinary work and discussion over the past twenty-six years.

8. See Darlene M. Juschka, ed., *Feminism in the Study of Religion: A Reader* (New York: Continuum 2001) and Elizabeth A. Castelli, ed., *Women, Gender, and Religion* (New York: Palgrave, 2001).

always linked gender to “power over” and understood gender “as a central dynamic through which power is exercised.”<sup>9</sup> Then, in a second step, I will maintain that such gender<sup>10</sup> analysis must be situated within a feminist kyriarchal analytic. Because the sex-gender system intersects with other structures of domination such as race, class, ethnicity, age, culture and religion, it is necessary to develop a complex kyriarchal sociopolitical analytic of domination.

Finally, I will propose three ethical criteria, articulated by the black feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins, for evaluating a feminist intersectional gender analysis<sup>11</sup> at work not only in Christian but in all religious feminist discourses. I thereby hope to contribute some critical concepts for a variegated feminist discussion across religious and cultural boundaries.

## Feminism and Gender

I will first discuss gender within a critical feminist framework, although “feminist” is a much disputed and multifaceted concept. Not only is feminism often rejected as a Western colonialist term, it is also shunned in the academy as too ideological and as non-scientific. Moreover, in both the United States and all over the world, audiences still react negatively when they hear the word *feminist*. While many agree with the goals of feminism, they do not want to be labeled feminist, because they associate the f-word *feminism* with either lesbian, bra-burning, men-hating, crazy wo/men, or Western colonialism. The press reinforces this prejudice when it asks, “Is feminism dead?” and always answers with a resounding yes. For these reasons, I hasten to explain how I understand the f-word *feminist*.

To my mind, the best definition of feminism is expressed by a popular bumper sticker which, tongue-in-cheek, declares: “Feminism is the radical notion that wo/men are people.” This definition reminds us of the centuries of democratic struggles for equal rights and full citizenship. It asserts that wo/men are not beasts of burden, sex-objects, temptresses, or goddesses. Rather, all wo/men without any exceptions are fully entitled citizens in society and religion who should have equal power, rights and responsibilities. Yet Christian wo/men have not been accorded such citizen-rights in religion and society throughout the centuries.

Although there are many divergent forms and even contradictory articulations of feminism today, such that it is appropriate to speak of “feminisms” in

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9. Lynne Segal, *Why Feminism? Gender, Psychology, Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 42.

10. For the argument that gender is a Western invention, see Oyeronke Oyewumi, *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977).

11. Patricia Hill Collins, *Fighting Words: Black Women and the Search for Justice* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).

the plural,<sup>12</sup> most feminists nevertheless agree that contemporary feminism is not just a political movement which is akin to other emancipatory movements. It also is an intellectual methodology for investigating and theorizing the experience and structures of wo/men's dehumanization. I suggest that the diverse theoretical articulations of feminism come together in their critique of elite, male, white, Western supremacy and in their assertion that gender is socially constructed rather than innate or ordained by G\*d.

Feminism—as I understand it—is not just concerned with gender inequities and female marginalization. Rather, feminism is first of all a multi-various social, political, and religious movement that seeks to transform kyriarchy, which means the domination of the emperor, lord, slave-master, father, husband—the elite propertied male head of household. I have coined the word *kyriarchy*, an analogy to the German term *Herrschaft*, in order to distinguish a critical feminist intersectional analytic from the prevalent dualistic feminist understanding of patriarchy as the domination of all men over all wo/men. This understanding of patriarchy is inadequate, because many men are dominated while many elite wo/men have had power over men and other wo/men.

Moreover, the neologism *kyriarchy*, I submit, is historically more accurate and the\*logically more appropriate than the term *hierarchy*, which is commonly used in English to designate a pyramidal system of power relations. Whereas much of feminist thought still locates the root of misogyny and patriarchal oppression in gender dualism, I argue to the contrary that the sociopolitical, pyramidal system of exploitation produces such ideological gender constructions. I understand kyriarchy as a pyramidal system of dominations that are inter-structured and multiplied through racism, heterosexism, classism, ethnocentrism, colonialism, ageism and other structures of exploitation. Gender is inflected by race, class, age, culture, and religion.<sup>13</sup> Although kyriarchy has changed throughout history, its Greek Aristotelian articulation is still powerful in Western culture and Christian religion today. It would therefore be interesting to study how kyriarchy has been articulated in other cultures and religions.<sup>14</sup>

Feminism always has expressed itself also as an intellectual and a spiritual movement insofar as it is seeking to come into a different consciousness and hence is struggling to change relations of inequity and dehumanization. Participation in social movements for change has often led to different self-understandings and different visions of the world. Such different understandings in turn lead to the

12. See Sandra Kemp and Judith Squires, eds., *Feminisms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

13. See Everett Yuehong Zhang, "Goudui and the State: Constructing Entrepreneurial Masculinity in Two Cosmopolitan Areas of Post-Socialist China," in *Gendered Modernities: Ethnographic Perspectives*, ed. Dorothy L. Hodgson (New York: Palgrave, 2001).

14. For instance, the Japanese feminist theologian Hisako Kinukawa, in *Wo/men and Jesus in Mark: A Japanese Feminist Perspective* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1994), 15-22, points to the "emperor system" as a similar system to that of classical Greek kyriarchy.

articulation of a feminist politics and spirituality that can empower wo/men to bring about further change in society and religion.

In the past as in the present, feminist movements have emerged from wo/men's participation in emancipatory struggles, such as the struggles for full democratic citizenship, religious freedom, abolition of slavery, civil rights, national and cultural independence, as well as the struggles of the labor, peace, or GLBT movements. In these struggles for civil and human rights, feminists have learned that the terms "human" or "workers" or "civil rights" often do not include the rights and interests of wo/men. Therefore, it is necessary to struggle specifically for "wo/men's rights, well-being and self-determination."

In the past four decades, feminists also have been and remain engaged in multiple and variegated struggles to change religion, struggles over: equal rights in religion; access to sacred power; centuries of exclusion from ordination; reproductive rights and the rights of differently abled wo/men; wo/men's bodily integrity on religious grounds; moral agency and personal authority to determine their own lives; violence against wo/men in the home and the imperialist exploitation of wo/men around the world; abolishing death-dealing structures and the languages of hate; combating exploitative, sacral powers of domination and reconstructing a radical, democratic church and society that repents of and undoes the horrors of colonialism and other forms of wo/men's oppression; wo/men's the\*logical education and teaching authority, seeking to overcome the centuries of silencing in the\*logy, church, and society; a new sacred language that reclaims the power of word and ritual as well as the authority of religious naming; and last but not least, in struggles for a different kind of spirituality and liberating the\*logy that seek to envision and name the divine and sacred anew. Presently, the struggles against wo/men's second-class citizenship center on the question of the non-ordination of wo/men in Roman Catholicism and on that of same sex marriage or the ordination of gay and transgendered people in Protestant churches.

I do not want to suggest, however, that only Christian religion and the\*logy are such sites of feminist struggles. To the contrary, feminists in Judaism, Islam, Buddhism,<sup>15</sup> Sikhism, Hinduism, Chinese religions, or Indigenous religions around the world raise both similar and different issues. In consequence, not only biblical religions but also other major world religions are undergoing intense critical scrutiny by feminists. All religious belief systems and institutional practices are experiencing the growing pains of feminist re-visions.

Religion has not only been used throughout the centuries to oppress wo/men. It also has found its most faithful adherents among wo/men. Hence, no serious reform of society in the interest of wo/men's emancipation will be

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15. See, for example, Simone Heidegger, *Buddhismus, Geschlechterverhältnis, und Diskriminierung: Die gegenwärtige Diskussion im Shin-Buddhismus Japans* (Münster: LIT, 2004).

successful if it does not seek to also advance the reform of religion. Moreover, since all reforms are interdependent, one cannot change the law, education, or other cultural institutions without also attempting to transform religion. Feminists who believe that we can neglect the re-vision of religion because there are more pressing political issues at stake do not recognize the impact of religion on society, and especially on the lives of women.<sup>16</sup>

Millions of women around the world actively participate in religious practices and institutions. They derive their self-identity, self-respect, sense of worth, dignity, courage, and vision from their religious engagement. Consequently one cannot simply relegate wo/men's religious commitments to "false consciousness." This not only overlooks wo/men's active participation in all religions, it also disregards the fact that religion still provides a framework of meaning that is not just alienating and oppressive but also self-affirming and liberating for millions of women.

To reject religion as totally oppressive or to neglect it as a positive source of empowerment and hope in creating a better future for wo/men would be to relinquish religion to the ownership claims of reactionary, rightwing fundamentalisms.<sup>17</sup> The resurgence of such global anti-feminist dogmatism and its success not only among men but also among women exploits people's fears, alienation, deep anxieties and feeling of loss concerning the world as they have known it. The experience of losing cultural, social, and religious roots coupled with the sense of personal isolation and social marginalization leads to a desire for assured certainty, definite security, fixed truth, and a stable picture of the world that is guaranteed by G\*d. With this desire comes a longing for great leaders and father figures who will take care of everything and therefore rightfully require submission.

Wo/men's traditional cultural and religious socialization toward feminine passivity, subordination, and self-sacrificing love for a man conditions them to be lured by the appeal of such religious fundamentalist promises. Since the fundamentalist religious ethos of submission addresses wo/men's personal, economic, and political insecurities, it can harness these insecurities for rightwing, antidemocratic ends. Therefore, the maxim that the progress of a society can be judged by the progress of its wo/men must be applied also to the progress of wo/men in Christian and all other religions.

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16. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, *The Original Feminist Attack on the Bible: The Woman's Bible*, ed. Barbara Welter (New York: Arno, 1974). See also the collection of essays *Searching the Scriptures: A Feminist Introduction* (New York: Crossroad, 1993), which I initiated and edited in celebration of the centennial anniversary of the *Woman's Bible*.

17. See Shirley Rogers Radl, *The Invisible Woman: Target of the Religious New Right* (New York: Dell, 1981); Sara Diamond, *Spiritual Warfare: The Politics of the Christian Right* (Boston: South End, 1989); Hans Küng and Jürgen Moltmann, *Fundamentalism as an Ecumenical Challenge* (London: SCM, 1992); "Fundamentalismen," *Beiträge zur feministischen Theorie und Praxis* 32 (1992); Margaret Lamberts Bendroth, *Fundamentalism and Gender: 1875 to the Present* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993); and Elizabeth A. Castelli and Janet R. Jakobsen, eds., *Interventions: Activists and Academics Respond to Violence* (New York: Palgrave, 2004).

Throughout the centuries religion has been used both as a weapon against and as a defense for subjugated wo/men. Religion has been invoked in wo/men's struggles for access to citizenship, public speaking, reproductive rights, the\*logical education or ordained ministry. In these often bitter debates, the opposing parties continue to cite religion not only for and against wo/men's full participation and religious leadership, but also for and against the full citizenship of freeborn wo/men, the emancipation of slave wo/men, colonized wo/men, the rights of GLBT people, and, finally, for and against economic equity for poor wo/men and their children.

In sum, I argue here that it is necessary to contextualize the ethics of gender in feminist movements that seek to transform kyriarchal religious structures which not only perpetuate dehumanizing heterosexism and gender stereotypes, but also perpetuate other forms of wo/men's oppression, such as racism, poverty, religious exclusivism and colonialism.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, it is important to adopt a feminist decolonizing analysis<sup>19</sup> of the kyriarchal sex-gender system in which religious discourses are embedded and which in turn shape and sustain this kyriarchal system and its discourses. This kyriarchal sex-gender system is articulated differently in different religions and cultures, but it still seems to be at work in all of them.

### The Kyriarchal Sex-Gender System as a Discursive Frame of Meaning

The assumption of "natural" sex-gender differences informs everyday experience and turns it into "common sense" knowledge, making gender difference appear to be "commonplace" and "G\*d-given." The kyriarchal sex-gender system<sup>20</sup> serves as a pre-constructed frame of thinking and meaning. It constructs masculine and feminine difference in positivistic terms either as a natural-historical fact or as a metaphysical essence that is revealed rather than socially constructed. By presenting the sex-gender system of male/female or masculine/feminine as universal and "common sense," this pre-constructed frame of meaning obscures and mystifies the reality that the very notion of two sexes is a sociocultural construct for maintaining kyriarchal domination rather than a biological "given" or innate essence. This gender-frame religiously legitimates the kyriarchal disciplines of

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18. For the implication of such intersectional studies for feminist theory and pedagogy, see Laura Gray-Rosendale and Gil Harootunian, eds., *Fractured Feminisms: Rhetoric, Context, and Contestation* (New York: SUNY Press, 2003). See also Elizabeth Abel, Barbara Christian, and Helene Moglen, eds., *Female Subjects in Black and White: Race, Psychoanalysis, Feminism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Ruth Frankenberg, ed., *Displacing Whiteness: Essays in Social and Cultural Criticism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997); and Joan Acker, *Class Questions: Feminist Answers* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006).

19. See my book *The Power of the Word: Scripture and the Rhetoric of Empire* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007). See also Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (Louisville: WJK, 2005).

20. For the elaboration of this notion and discussion of the literature on this concept, see my book *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon, 1992), 105-14.

the body and destroys the creative and unique self as the image of the divine which each of us is called to become.

Feminist theory has elaborated that the kyriarchal sex-gender system operates simultaneously on four discursive levels: first on the *social-political* level; second, on the *ethical-symbolic* level; third, on the *biological-natural* level; and finally, on the *linguistic-grammatical* level. These levels are interactive and mutually reinforce each other. Different feminist approaches enter their critical analysis at different nodal points of these interlocking discursive levels and hence emphasize different aspects of the sex-gender system. They generally distinguish the following terms: *male/female*, which classify human beings on the basis of anatomical differences; *man/woman*, which are based on social relations; and *masculine/feminine*, which are seen as the cultural-religious ideals, norms, values, and standards appropriate to one's gender position.

Feminist liberationist and postcolonial the\*logies and studies in religion adopt a social analytic that can break through the kyriarchal sex-gender system's totalizing dualistic frame of reference. Such an analytic enables one not only to interpret religious texts and traditions as socioreligious constructions, but also to see how gender, race, class and colonialist structures are multiplicative and interdependent. This can be shown with respect to all four levels of the kyriarchal sex-gender system.

### *The Sociopolitical Level*

A critical feminist inquiry begins its analytic work with the sociopolitical level of the kyriarchal sex-gender system. If one conceptualizes reality not in terms of gender dualism, but rather as a socially constructed web of interactive structures of dehumanization, one is able to problematize dichotomies such as world-church, human-divine, profane-sacred, politics-religion, orthodox-heretic, earth-heaven, male-female. If oppression is understood not in terms of dualistic opposites but as variegated kyriarchal social, interactive, and multiplicative structures of power, it becomes apparent that social location determines cultural-religious positions and intellectual perspectives. In such an analysis, the categories male/female, masculine/feminine, or man/woman do not signify dualistic opposites or fixed gender slots but sociopolitical and socioreligious discursive practices that are defined not only by sex, but also by race, class, age and culture. The social relations that give rise to gender differences are socioculturally and religiously constructed as relations of domination; they are not simply biological givens. In other words, the world is determined by relations of domination. Sex-gender is a part of such relations of ruling which also ground other divisions such as class, ethnicity or race.

Although maleness and femaleness are supposedly natural—biological “givens”—they are cultural norms that are backed by social and religious sanctions. Since sex-gender differences are grounded in social kyriarchal arrangements, they are articulated differently in different historical periods and religions.

Nonetheless, they are taken to be “commonplace” universals, natural “givens,” that are ordained by G\*d. Whereas in Greco-Roman antiquity, for instance, menial service was seen as appropriate to the nature of slaves and serfs, in modernity it is construed as a “feminine” ideal appropriate to the nature of wo/men. Public political service in turn is conceptualized as “masculine,” appropriate to the nature of men. This modern separation between the public male sphere and the private female domain has generated a separate system of economics for wo/men<sup>21</sup> which has resulted in the increasing feminization of poverty and the destitution of female-headed households<sup>22</sup>—a development with devastating effects especially on wo/men of the “two-thirds world” and their children.

Consequently, the modern kyriarchal sex-gender system must be scrutinized not only for its economic-cultural heterosexist biases. It must also be analyzed with respect to its classist, racist, and colonialist underpinnings. Hundreds of years ago, Aristotle had argued that the freeborn, propertied, educated Greek male is the highest of moral beings and that all other members of the human race are deficient by nature in the interest of his service.<sup>23</sup> Modern political philosophy continues to assume that the propertied, educated elite Western man is defined by reason, self-determination, and full citizenship whereas wo/men and other subordinated peoples are characterized by emotion, service and dependence.<sup>24</sup> They are seen in colonialist discourses not as rational and responsible adult subjects, but as emotional, helpless and child-like objects. In short, kyriarchal societies, cultures and religions need for their functioning a “servant class,” a “servant race,” or a “servant people,” be they slaves, serfs, maids, coolies, or mummies. The existence of such a “servant class” is maintained through religion, law, education, socialization, and brute violence. It is sustained by the belief that members of a “servant class” of people are by nature, or by divine decree, inferior to those whom they are destined to serve.<sup>25</sup>

### *The Ethical-Symbolic Level*

Western political kyriarchal relations of domination and subordination are explicitly formulated in the context of Greek kyriarchal democracy. They have been

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21. See Maria Mies, *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale: Women in the International Division of Labor* (London: Zed, 1986).

22. See the systemic analyses in Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Anne Carr, eds., *Wo/men Work and Poverty* (Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 1987).

23. Susan Moller Okin, *Women in Western Political Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 73-96.

24. See Elisabeth List, “Homo Politicus—Femina Privata: Thesen zur Kritik der politischen Anthropologie,” in *Weiblichkeit in der Moderne: Ansätze feministischer Vernunftkritik*, ed. J. Conrad and U. Konnertz (Tübingen: Diskord, 1986), 75-95.

25. For example, the biographical reflection and analysis of apartheid as an ideology and institution to maintain a “servant people” by Mark Mathabene, *Kaffir Boy: The True Story of a Black Youth's Coming of Age in Apartheid South Africa* (New York: Macmillan, 1986).

mediated by Christian scriptural-the\*logical traditions and have decisively determined modern forms and ideologies of democracy. Feminist political philosophers have documented that modern (and postmodern) understandings of both rationality and the world have been articulated by white, Western, elite, educated men.<sup>26</sup> These men have not only defined white wo/men as “others,” but also all other non-persons as “others” who lack human—that is, masculine—qualities. The definition of other races and peoples as “feminine Other” has enabled colonial Western powers to exploit and utilize religion in the colonial capitalist quest for identity and property.

The modern bourgeois ethos of “femininity” prescribes that “good” wo/men perform unpaid services in and outside the family with self-less love, nurturing care, and patient loving kindness. The ethos of “true womanhood,” romantic love, and domesticity defines wo/men’s nature as “being for others” in actual or spiritual motherhood. Whereas men are measured by the masculine standards of self-assertion, independence, power and control, wo/men are called to fulfill their G\*d-given true nature and destiny by self-sacrificing service and loving self-effacement. The Christian preaching of self-sacrificing love and humble service reinforces and perpetuates the cultural socialization of wo/men to self-less femininity and altruistic behavior.

Moreover, since the industrial revolution in Europe and America, church and religion have been pushed out of the public realm and relegated to the private sphere of individualistic piety, charitable work, and the cultivation of home and family. Nevertheless, both religion and wo/men were also crucial in maintaining public interests in the antithetical “other” and in shaping Western colonialism.<sup>27</sup> Like the “White Lady,” Christianity as a “missionary religion” also had the function to “civilize” the savages, who were understood as “untamed nature.” Here, the Western discourses on femininity and female nature are grounded in in the colonial exercise of power.<sup>28</sup>

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26. Genevieve Lloyd, *Man of Reason: Male and Female in Western Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984). See also her chapter, “The Man of Reason,” in *Women, Knowledge, and Reality: Explorations in Feminist Philosophy*, ed. Ann Garry and Marilyn Pearsall (New York: Routledge, 1992), 111: “By the Man of Reason I mean the ideal of rationality associated with the rational philosophers of the seventeenth century. And, secondly, something more nebulous—the residue of that ideal in our contemporary consciousness. . . . The main feature of the Man of Reason that I am concerned to bring into focus is his maleness.” See also Sarah Coakley, “Gender and Knowledge in Western Philosophy: The ‘Man of Reason’ and the ‘Feminine Other’ in Enlightenment Thought,” in *The Special Nature of Women?* ed. Anne Carr and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (London: SCM, 1991), 75-84.

27. See, for example, Joan Jacobs Brumberg, “The Ethnological Mirror: American Women and Their Heathen Sisters, 1870-1910,” in *Women and the Structure of Society. Selected Research from the Fifth Berkshire Conference on the History of Women*, ed. Barbara J. Harris and JoAnn K. McNamara (Durham: Duke University Press, 1984), 108-28.

28. See my article, “The Politics of Otherness: Biblical Interpretation as a Critical Praxis for Liberation,” in *The Future of Liberation Theology: Essays in Honor of Gustavo Gutiérrez*, ed. Marc H. Ellis and Otto Maduro (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1989), 311-25, and Kwok Pui-Lan, “The Image of the

In the process of religious privatization and cultural “feminization,” the clergy lost their privileged status and came to be treated like “woman” in polite society. This feminization of Christian religion has led both to the emasculation of the clergy in society<sup>29</sup> and to the reasserting of their masculine roles in the\*logy, church, and the home. Here, the debates on wo/men’s ordination have their “setting in life.”<sup>30</sup> Wo/men’s recent access to professional ministry and the\*logy is resisted by male clerics who fear that the church will be totally feminized if wo/men join the ranks of the male church leadership.

### *The Biological-Natural Level*

Like “white and black,” both “maleness and femaleness” and “man and woman” are discursive categories and symbolic constructs of the kyriarchal sex-gender system. They *appear*, however, to be “*natural*” or “*factual*” *sex differences* in everyday understanding. Hence, the second-class citizenship of wo/men is not primarily achieved by brute force but in and through individual cultural-religious socialization into the naturalized kyriarchal sex-gender system and the public discourses that reinforce it. Like education, religion also has a major role in the discursive construction and symbolic legitimization of naturalized, heterosexual sex-gender relations. For instance, biblical religion has applied the metaphor of patriarchal marriage-relationships to the relation between G\*d and the individual soul as well as to the relationship between Christ and the community. Early Christian the\*logy continued the rhetoric of Hebrew prophetic discourses that understood God as the groom/husband of his bride/wife Israel. In Western mysticism and piety, men, like wo/men, have taken up the “feminine” position of receptivity and surrender with respect to G\*d, conforming to a masculine G\*d’s desire for the feminine, while at the same time sustaining his masculine practices of control and superiority with respect to the world.

This analogy between G\*d-Christ-husband-male, on the one hand, and soul-bride-female, on the other, has become “naturalized” and biologized in modern the\*logical discourses.<sup>31</sup> Christian churches have excluded wo/men from ordination on grounds of anatomical sex until very recently, and my own church still does so today. Female sex-gender disqualifies one from representing Christ.

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“White Lady”: Gender and Race in Christian Mission,” in *The Special Nature of Women?* ed. Anne Carr and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (Philadelphia: Trinity International, 1991), 19-27. See also Kwok Pui-lan, *Chinese Women and Christianity 1860-1927* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1992).

29. Rosemary Radford Ruether, “Male Clericalism and the Dread of Women,” *The Ecumenist* 11 (1973): 65-69.

30. See the analysis of this situation in my keynote address at the Second Ordination Conference in 1978, reprinted in *Discipleship of Equals*, 129-50, especially 140-44. For a comparative ecumenical view, see also Jacqueline Field Bibb, *Women toward Priesthood: Ministerial Politics and Feminist Practice* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

31. For the right wing, conservative tendencies of such a “biologization” process, see Renate Bridenthal, Atina Grossmann, and Marion Kaplan, eds., *When Biology Became Destiny: Women in Weimar and Nazi Germany* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1984).

Whereas traditional the\*logy had rationalized the exclusion of wo/men on Aristotelian and scriptural grounds of subordination, modern the\*logy argues either that wo/men cannot physically resemble Christ, the bridegroom of the church, or they maintain wo/men's essential difference and complementarity of role.

In order to undo such kyriarchal "naturalizing" sex-gender tendencies, some feminist the\*logians have insisted that religious discourses must distinguish between biological sex and kyriarchal symbolic gender constructions. Although attempts to separate biological sex from gender are common in the\*logical discourses, they are nevertheless problematic since they do not sufficiently reflect that the cultural sex-gender system "naturalizes" the category of "sex" as biologically given rather than as discursively constructed—just as it has done with regard to race and colonized people. For instance, common sense holds that facial hair is a physical male characteristic. This commonplace assumption conceals, however, that it is discursively constructed. In order to uphold this ostensibly male sex standard, a multi-billion-dollar cosmetic industry strives to eradicate all facial hair in wo/men. Anatomical physical differences are discursively constructed and socially maintained as cultural sex differences. Moreover, varying cultures construct the meaning of anatomical distinctions differently. For instance, one could argue that boy and girl children are physically more alike than girls and nursing mothers. In addition, biological differences receive different significance if they are discursively constructed on a continuum rather than in terms of dualistic oppositional classification.<sup>32</sup>

Finally, the religious naturalization of gender and its reduction to anatomical sex conceals its social location in a modern bio-social science of human variation. For, according to nineteenth-century scientists

lower races represented the "female" type of the human species, and females the "lower race" of gender. . . . By analogy with the so-called lower races, women, the sexually deviant, the criminal, the urban poor, and the insane were in one way or another constructed as biological "races apart" whose differences from the white male, and likeness to each other, "explained" their different and lower position in the social hierarchy.<sup>33</sup>

### *The Linguistic-Grammatical Level*

A religion that upholds kyriarchal sex-gender differences as natural or G\*d-given can do so because its readings of Scriptures and traditions engage in a linguistic-

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32. As Ann Oakley in *Sex, Gender, and Society* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), 191, already observed in 1972: "One expert on intersexuality has said that it is impossible to define male and female genital morphologies as distinct: they exist as a continuum of possible developments and are thus a constant reminder, not of biological polarity of male and female but of their biological identity."

33. N. Leys Stepan, "Race and Gender," in *The "Racial" Economy of Science: Toward a Democratic Future*, ed. Sandra Harding (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 361.

symbolic process of “naturalizing” grammatical gender. Not only religious, but also kyriocentric cultural language in general repeatedly re-inscribes the cultural-religious prejudices and socio-kyriarchal relations which in turn undergird their disciplinary practices. While many studies have been done with regard to Western grammatically androcentric languages, research is needed as to how languages that are structured according to status construct gender. However, I am aware only of Japanese the\*logian Satoko Yamaguchi’s work in this regard.<sup>34</sup>

The term *gender* derives from Latin *genus*, which means “class, kind, or category in general.” The Western grammatical masculine/feminine noun-classification system is said to have been introduced by the fifth-century B.C.E. Sophist Protagoras. If Protagoras had used a different classification system such as, for instance, long/short, the devastating conflation of grammatical gender with biological sex in Western symbolic discourses might have been avoided.

According to the grammarian Dennis Baron,<sup>35</sup> the association of grammatical gender with human generation was developed by medieval grammarians into Latin [*species*], an association which later grammarians imposed on Old English by arguing for it in cultural-religious terms. For instance, in his *Theory of Language* published in 1788, James Beattie argues for the distinction of biological sex as the primary basis for noun-classification on the\*logical grounds: “Beings superior to man, although we conceive them to be of no sex, are spoken of as masculine in most of the modern tongues of Europe, on account of their dignity; the male being according to our ideas, the nobler sex. But idolatrous nations acknowledge both male and female deities; and some of them have even given to the Supreme Being a name of the feminine gender.”<sup>36</sup>

How much language and social structures are intertwined becomes evident in the fact that in 1850 the British Parliament passed an act declaring that henceforth the pronoun *he* would be used as an inclusive reference to wo/men as well as to men, thereby replacing the use of “they” as generic with the pseudo-generic “he.”<sup>37</sup> The Western linguistic sex-gender system that uses gender classifications as rooted in biological sex cannot help but reify and naturalize sociopolitical and cultural-religious gender constructs. In such a linguistic system, masculine terms function as “generic” language in which *man/male/masculine/he* stands for human *and* male, while *woman/female/feminine/she* connotes only femaleness. Grammatically androcentric “generic” Western languages that are based on the classical grammatical systems of Greek and Latin explicitly mention wo/men

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34. Satoko Yamaguchi, “Father Image of God and Inclusive Language: A Reflection in Japan,” in *Toward a New Heaven and a New Earth: Essays in Honor of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza*, ed. Fernando F. Segovia (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2003), 199-224.

35. Dennis Baron, *Grammar and Gender* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986).

36. Robert H. Robins, *A Short History of Linguistics* (London: Longmans, 1979), 137.

37. See Casey Miller and Kate Swift, *Words and Women: New Language in New Times* (Doubleday: Anchor, 1977).

only as the exception to the rule, as problematic, or specifically as particular individuals. In all other cases one has to adjudicate in light of contextual linguistic markers whether wo/men are meant or not.

Moreover, Western androcentric languages and discourses do not just marginalize wo/men or eliminate them from the historical cultural-religious record. As kyriocentric languages, they also construct the meaning of being “wo/men” or being “men” differently. What it means to be female/woman/feminine does not so much depend on one’s sex but rather on one’s location in the socio-symbolic kyriarchal system of multiplicative superordinations and subordinations. The meaning of “woman” is unstable and ever shifting<sup>38</sup> depending not so much on its sex-gender relation, but on its socio-systemic kyriarchal contextualization.<sup>39</sup>

The category “woman” today has become a “naturalized,” generic, sex-based term, although until very recently it referred to lower class females only. A statement such as “slaves were not wo/men” offends “commonsense” understandings, whereas a statement such as “slaves were not ladies” makes perfect sense. One can perceive the slippages, the cultural constructedness, and the historical ambiguity of the meaning of “woman” much more easily in the term “lady,” because this discursive appellation readily “reveals” its race, class, and colonial bias. “Lady,” until very recently, not only was restricted to wo/men of higher status or educational refinement, it also functioned to symbolize “true womanhood” and femininity.

Such a cursory discussion of the Western kyriarchal sex-gender system explains why critical feminist explorations of religious symbol systems usually raise great, albeit often repressed, anxieties among religious wo/men. Since colonized religious men are culturally stereotyped as “feminine,” they need to establish their cultural-religious self-identity by professing and maintaining masculine standards. Wo/men in turn are upholding the ideal of femininity which in modernity means that men are to be educated to be *their own man*, whereas wo/men are to be educated to be *women for men* (Rousseau).<sup>40</sup> Accordingly, Christian wo/men understandably fear a loss of their cultural-religious feminine self-identity and prestige if they no longer can model their relations to men on the paradigm of their relation with Jesus, the perfect man for whom they live.<sup>41</sup> As long as this fear is not addressed the\*logically, Christian wo/men and men will remain entrenched in the kyriarchal sex-gender system.

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38. See Denise Riley, *“Am I That Name?”: Feminism and the Category of “Women” in History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).

39. The same can be said for race classifications. Cf. Gloria A. Marshall, “Racial Classifications: Popular and Scientific,” in *The “Racial” Economy of Science*, ed. Sandra Harding (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 116-27.

40. Susan Moller Okin, *ibid.*, 135.

41. For a feminist discussion of the interplay between language and identity see, for instance, the contributions in Joyce Penfield, ed., *Women and Language in Transition* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1987).

## Conclusion

To sum up and conclude my argument: Feminist the\*logies and studies in religion explore the religious–cultural kyriarchal sex-gender system in order to understand the societal and religious second class citizenship status of wo/men. By situating a critical gender analysis in the diverse struggles for changing religious kyriarchal structures and mindsets of domination and subordination, we are able to articulate the differences between and within wo/men. By deconstructing religious kyriarchal discourses, we are able not only to overcome the the\*logical silencing and marginalization of wo/men in religion, but also to identify the resources in religious discourses and traditions that empower wo/men to surmount the discursive inculcations of the kyriarchal sex-gender system.

From such a critical feminist vantage point, scholars in religion are also able to formulate alternative religious visions and strategies for undoing the religious legitimizations of the kyriarchal sex-gender system. Such alternative discourses need to be articulated at all four levels: the sociopolitical, the cultural-symbolic, the biological-natural, and the linguistic-grammatical levels. In so doing, feminist the\*logies and studies in religion can articulate a spiritual-religious vision that is able to inspire diverse movements of liberation with a spiritual ethos of equality and well-being for everywoman and everyone.

Such critical feminist analyses and visions must be evaluated in terms of their effective power for change. Patricia Hill Collins has suggested three interdependent questions for the assessment of a social theory. These criteria can also be applied to the discourses of religious and the\*logical studies.

- Does a social or religious theory speak the truth to wo/men about the reality of their lives? Whose knowledge counts, whose standards are used, and who is discredited? Who decides what counts as knowledge, and how knowledge and truth are validated?
- What is the stance of a social or religious theory towards freedom, and what pragmatic strategies does it suggest to achieve its vision of emancipation? What is its theory of emancipation and does it facilitate political action for change?
- Does a critical social or religious theory move wo/men to struggle against dehumanization, and how effectively does it provide moral authority for emancipatory praxis? Does it engender the search for justice as an ongoing principled struggle that resists disciplinary power relations and gives meaning to everyday life?

If vision and knowledge are determined by their sociopolitical location and function, then knowledge and vision for the future must remain situated within the diverse feminist struggles which seek to overcome kyriarchal mindsets and exploitations. Feminists in religion are especially positioned to articulate

spiritualities of struggle that enable and defend life that is threatened or destroyed by hunger, destitution, sexual violence, torture and dehumanization. Such feminist spiritualities of struggle seek to give dignity and value to the life of the social non-person as the presence and image of the divine or sacred in our midst. To that end, feminist scholars in religion and the\*logy continue to seek not only to produce a different body of knowledge, but also to inspire people for engaging in the variegated feminist struggles around the world to change kyriarchal structures and to transform discourses of dehumanization. To be able to do so in the creative power of Wisdom/wisdom,<sup>42</sup> we need to remain rooted in wo/men's movements for social and religious change.

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42. See my books *Wisdom Ways: Introducing Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2001) and *The Open House of Wisdom: Critical Feminist Theological Explorations* (Tokyo: Shinkyō Shuppansha, 2005; only in Japanese).