

Religious Feminism in the West – Some Basic Observations

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Abstract

This paper observes the main aspects of the debate between religious feminism and secularism in the western academic sphere. It assesses the current arguments related to the relationship between secular feminism and religious feminism. This area of academia has been subject to increased interest in recent years, and a number of important publications have offered insights into the specifics of this matter. It touches on elements that helped with the identification of a number of contradictory movements in regard to the relationship between women, the practice of religion, and the social dynamics of the West. One of the main objectives of this paper is to explore questions about the relationship between religion and feminism, particularly from a Western-centric perspective.

Keywords: Religious Feminism, Secularism, Religion, Gender.

Introduction:

As this paper will demonstrate, the generic philosophy of feminism in religion can be considered as a recent development within the realm of religious practices in the Western sphere. That said, the philosophy of religious feminism contains a body of work which challenges that idea and asserts a critique stretching back to the 19th century. Consequentially, where current thinkers seek to put forward a number of questions about the role and function of religious texts, their associated practice traditions, and the utility of theology to the West, a need exists for an academic reassessment of a gender studies-based enquiry into the current state of religious feminism.

We think it is pertinent to suggest that the philosophy of religion is of importance to both the feminist and non-feminist when seeking to explain and understand current practice of religious concepts and beliefs. As such, this paper seeks to explore and assess the current debates related to the relationship between secular feminism and religious feminism in the West. This area of academia has been subject to increased interest in recent years, and a number of important publications have offered insights into the specifics of the matter at hand. However, as this synopsis will show, it is difficult to retain an academic research practice into a narrow interpretation of the underlying issues concerning gender relations in both daily and religious life.

This is an issue that Zwissler (2012) attempted to address by offering a review of accessible and available literature, when seen seeking to contribute to a conversation on the contradictory movements of women, religion and the West, therefore, it is likely to reflect the variables that underpin this. Essentially, any research-led enquiry into the literature concerning religious feminism in the West is likely to veer into a number of parallel and additional schools of thought. These observations provide for that assertion given thus far, subjects covered include religion, politics, sociology and psychology. It is important to note this, especially given that Scott's (2017) publication alludes to a claim that secularism is a progressive vehicle that can advance the stature of women and minorities as social agents and actors. What emerges here is the idea that religious practices and rituals are in line with ideas as to the purpose of religious institutions in shaping and defining the wider society.

Main Aspects of the Current Debate:

Woodhead (2012) argues that Western religious communities possess a need to assess the impact of religious practices upon gender relations. This is an issue that is considered as being long overdue. It has led to the religious discourse and its impact upon social dynamics has been largely ignored. In this vein, therefore, a need exists for exploring the debate between secular feminism and religious feminism in the West, including Europe. It is also of note that Frankenberry & Thie (1994) suggest that there is a large body of work seeking to further feminist perspectives within religious practice in the West. Core reasons are offered which would appear to contradict Woodhead's (2012) perspective.

These include the simple fact that Western religious practice has long been dominated by males; that the texts that inform current practices continue to determine the advancement and interpretation of religious structures along lines of patriarchy; and that confusion continues in the relationship between religious philosophy and feminist ideology

(Frankenberry & Thie, 1994). Where a discourse does exist, it is found within the area of how religious actors have moved feminist causes forward and contributed to rethinking gender relations in both daily life and religious life. This specific issue has benefitted from an interest that would address some of Woodhead's concerns.

Further, there are also in existence critiques of secularism's claim to be inherently progressive when it comes to women and minorities — most recently expressed in the book of Joan Scott (2017) and a recent special issue of *Social Compass Journal* (2017). However, this area of debate is not a new one. Stanton (1885: 389-390) had earlier suggested that "history shows that the moral degradation of woman is due more to theological superstitions than to all other influences together." Yet, the present-day political landscape undeniably shows that religious constituencies and institutional actors are mobilized for a reactionary agenda when it comes to the position of women.

It is from the above perspectives that Zwissler raises questions about the relationship between religion and feminism, particularly from a Western-centric perspective. In this paper, it is argued that a series of correlations could be found where religious practices are viewed through a lens that highlights misogyny and, as such, oppression of women. Zwissler (2012) concludes that because of these correlations, it is possible to argue that religious practices were naturally political ones because they were a party to female oppression. This issue was most recently reported within Joan Scott's (2017) most recent publication where the idea that secularism provides a response to this seeming oppression was subject to challenge. Indeed, it can also be suggested that equal importance needs to be offered to the role which feminist theory can be offered in developing religious practice in the West.

This issue, for the likes of Woodhead (2012), has been frequently neglected within the area of academic study because it tends not to take into account sociological factors, including gender. Indeed, Woodhead had argued that within the sociological sphere of Western religious practice, a premise emerges in which practitioners who engage in the issue of gender and sexuality have yet to convince leaders of the need to address sociological weaknesses within their settings. If one considers the works of Johnson (1993), it is suggested that the feminist collective furthers the idea that the underpinning philosophy of religion is unable to ignore the issue that gender plays in the practice of religion.

In that same work, Johnson states that Western religious sentiment is intrinsically misogynistic and claims that gender bias is not a new issue where the advancement of religious practice is considered. This, he suggests, is not a new issue within Western religion and equates the weakness of the religious hierarchy to address issues as being akin to a buried continent which cannot be seen by the naked eye. What results is a form of androcentricity that has distorted the human terrain to a point that the inclusion of women as a leading factor in the furtherance of the Church is deemed as inconsequential. Building upon this perspective, Woodhead (2012: 2) asserts that the need to address the silencing of women is an essential one that should be undertaken to address what is referred to as "gender blindness". This practice, Woodhead (2012) suggests, is an issue that has left the religious communities in the West as blinkered to both the impact of practice and the need for change.

Despite that, Woodhead argues that the removal of the institutional blinkers is also likely to have consequences for religious practice. With this, one can further an idea that those who define and shape the disciplines of religious practice are unwilling to attend to those which are religious disciplines because of the potential flux that would be created as a consequence. This perspective resonates with the works of Scott (2012) who argued that the utility of secularism in the West is undermined by requiring it to support conservative Christianity and that religion, by its very nature, does little to confront the ideas of oppression and misogyny, as proposed by Zwissler (2010).

The above narrative indicates that where reform occurs within the Western religious sphere, the practice methods, ideologies, underpinning theories and concepts, as well as those critical tools which further the relationship between religion and society would be subject to challenge (Woodhead, 2012). Indeed, this same premise heaps pressure upon the hierarchies of religious communities. When one considers sex differences within the context of religion, it is of note that Juschka (2010) argued for a process of differentiation in which a range of internal and external factors could be found. It was argued that each religious practice offered a series of different and divergent dynamics in regard to institutional beliefs, the role and function of the sexes within religious practices, and within a number of peripheral institutions, including education and governance (Juschka, 2010).

Essentially, Juschka suggests that the externality of religion can best be assessed from an outsider perspective and includes assessments of the interactive dynamics that occur when leaders and lay peoples interact. It is the quality of interaction, Juschka (2010) intimates, that leads to the creation of religious interpretations and perspectives, many of which lean towards a religious perspective of wider social dynamics, and leads to religious perspectives on homosexuality, family structures and relations, and regarding abortion (de Vaus & McAllister, 1987).

The perspectives offered by de Vaus & McAllister (1987) are further advanced by Hoagland & Frye (2000) who suggest that Mary Daly held a perspective that the relationship between religion and equality, in terms of men and women, was not mutually exclusive or compatible. They also say that Daly's early works were intended to alter organised religion so that women could benefit from an equal footing. This perspective, however, is of particular relevance to Catholicism and, as a consequence, largely undercuts similar themes found within other religions. Hoagland & Frye (2000) concluded that Daly latterly labelled organised religious practices in the West as being fundamentally oppressive and that women bore the brunt of that practice. Indeed, this is an issue that Dixon (2011) utilises in respect of gender dynamics in the USA.

Dixon indicates that in the USA, women have struggled to combat a number of sociological paradigms that have exposed them uniformly to gender and sexual inferiority. There, the ideals that further the notion of female identity have historically been different when they are assessed against peer state cultures and customs. It is also suggested, however, that the basis for cultural relations tends to be based on the perpetuation of patriarchy and has led to men benefitting from increased power over women (Dixon, 2011).

That said, Dixon also notes that across the globe, women are routinely subjected to forms of subjugation through structural issues that lead them into roles that are shaped by reduced access to effective education; where their sexuality can be used as a weapon; and where they are limited in their bodily choices in respect of the ability to access reproductive limiters such as contraception. It is within the USA, however, where historical systems of patriarchy have sustained masculine control over the levers of society and resulted in women's rights being negatively impacted, with conservative religious practices being a party to that outcome (Dixon, 2011).

This perspective, therefore, can be considered in line with feminist practices. When one considers the works of Steiner-Aeschliman and Mauss (1996), it is suggested that where feminists are close to organised religion — such as being nurtured in a religious environment — they are less likely to feel close to God as would someone with differing political opinions. What emerges here, for Yu (2009), is an acknowledgement of the necessity to recognize that women are subjected to domination from a multitude of sources that shape and direct their lives. These sources, for Yu, are geared towards countering the universality of the experiences of women's lives. Yet this reality also accounts for the numerous alternate and different types of social, religious, and political categories that shape and define what is classed as "women" (Yu, 2009: 2), as defined by male counterparts.

In such cases, the concept of feminism as a shaper of female destiny is considered as an ideology that helps to define and direct the numerous issues that are faced by women. Yet, this sociological and political perspective is one that Yu considers important to religious frameworks since in that context, it is assumed that there is utility in developing a different approach to the dynamic relationship between males and females.

The reason for this need, Yu contends, is that "Western feminism, which ignores realities of women who are being confronted with diversities of values and religious lifestyle, has often been criticized of being essentialist, monolithic, and ethnocentric" and it is here where a large number of women consider religious values being an important factor in shaping their lives. What is needed, Yu suggests, is finding a balance in between sociology and religion so that the cultural aspect of femininity can be shaped towards altering attitudes.

But there is an irony to the above perspective. In terms of politics and governance, i.e. with the USA being a nation of federal states that was founded upon the idea of freedom and equality, the reality is that women have had to face opposition in seeking to increase their access to increased rights so that they could experience social and political change (Dixon, 2011). This approach is indicative of the works of Fielding (1917) who suggested that the existence of gender bias correlates with aspects of the philosophy of religion because it helps the shaping of a number of traditional problems that are encountered within the normative social environment but, essentially, are ones that are constructed by powerful arenas, such as religious practice.

Fielding suggested that religion is a cultural phenomenon and the philosophy of religion is, by consequence, a factor in the origination and perpetuation of a dominant male tradition which is associated with both the production and the transmission of the gospel. This perspective is reinforced by an idea that Western religions have a history for excluding women — as well as devaluing them (Fielding, 1917). Fielding also argued that women's place within religious practices tended to be defined by a number of concepts and symbolism that could be associated with or identified as being of a masculine hue. These associations and identifications, Fielding said, acted as oppositional factors that advanced the ideals of femininity.

Fielding also argued that, contrary to the actualities of religion which were deemed to be part of the fabric of society and in a cultural context, this reality did not address the fundamentals of the philosophy of religion which he said were comprised of a series of influences that could be found within European and Anglo-American hues. The outcome of these dynamics suggests that the reality of gender bias is fuelled by aspects of ethnocentrism which itself acted as a core weakness when seeking to advance the merit of religious philosophy (Fielding, 1917). This perspective, therefore, may help to explain the assertions of Steiner-Aeschliman and Mauss (1996) — who this paper has earlier identified as arguing that feminists that were close to organised religions, including as part of a nurturing system of family dynamics — were less likely to feel close to God when assessed against a person who had alternate political ideals.

Steiner-Aeschliman and Mauss (1996) concluded their works by suggesting that such moves were indicative of gender and sexual contradiction but this reality existed in the relevance of Higgins' (1987) works in relation to self-discrepancy theory, which is also a party to this discourse. In respect to the issue of cognitive dissonance, Steiner-Aeschliman and Mauss (1996) argued that this issue was an inherent one that was required to be fully explained and, as such, a gap can be found in the literature related to this subject. That said, Melvin (2010) holds a perspective that the incorporation of cognitive dissonance theory into religious practice narratives creates space for numerous different choices that allow people to reduce the level of dissonance that affects the follower. This perspective built upon the earlier works of Aronson, Turner, & Carlsmith (1963) who had argued that a need can be found in changing personal religious beliefs to suit the predicaments that are experienced by individuals.

It is to be noted that Aronson et al.'s (1963) works relate to generic gender or sex differences and, as such, concerns females and males equally. Nonetheless, the issue of dissonant cognition can assist with furthering a process that correlates with the change in the belief process so that present predicaments can adhere to the current mindset (Batson, 1975). Melvin (2010) concluded that these psychological aspects, as offered by Aronson et al (1963) and Batson (1975) can assist with reducing what burdens emerge as a consequence of the mental discord that results from religious practices and their association to the individual and her life experiences. However, this perspective does little to address a reality that allows for the continuance of male signifier dominance (Cobb & Griffin, 1976).

Cobb & Griffin (1976) suggest that the continued dominance of male insignia within religious practice, including reference to male deities, forms only a fraction of the problems that result from the practice of what is termed as 'classical theism'. In this, it is suggested that in line with a prism which acts in a way that it is capable of refracting light which it comes into contact with, the persistence of religious philosophies and practices continue to 'refract' God through terms that are consistent with gender. This includes the continual reference to God as 'he,' 'him,' et al. Such terms, Cobb & Griffin (1976) argued, solidified the possibility of a rebalance of religious gender practices. They also suggest that the actual manner in which associated issues and problems with the place of women in religion is shaped by the philosophy of religion because of the reliance upon gendered construction of religious deities (Cobb & Griffin, 1976).

Cobb & Griffin (1976) argued that there was an inherent problem within the employed religious language. It was said it extended far beyond the meaning or usage of gender-led metaphors, and that the fundamental issues of truth were being usurped by the weakness of women in religions in the West. However, it was also recognised that these gender language usages had been appropriated by mainstream religious philosophers who were capable of trading a number of uncritical patterns of behaviour and relations between the hierarchies of practitioners and leaders. It is because of the language issue, Cobb & Griffin (1976) argue, that phrases and words, including 'father' or 'lord' tend to go unchecked. Indeed, it is also asserted that where the existence of a female model creeps into the constructed homosocial circle, the tendency is to make remarks to the contrary because, for Cobb & Griffin, the acceptance of female models within Western religious spheres was more likely to be treated with derision.

Another issue which emerges from the works of Cobb & Griffin is the notion that popular concepts within wider contemporary philosophy, Cartesian cognitive subjects and Kantian autonomy, create space for the existence of an omnipotent deity that is shaped in masculine hues and possesses the qualities of the male species. In fairness, this perspective is a feminist one and one that would reside well in the thinking of researchers such as Stanton (1885) and Johnson (1992). Yet, it is also noted that the contemporary theological education setting utilise a philosophy of religion that provides for explicit counter arguments for omnipotence (Suchocki, 1988).

In such cases it is arguable that grounds exist for this practice to be conceptually incoherent and can be undermined through effective scientific and moral argument – to a point that it can be considered as morally offensive and demeaning to women (Howell, 1998). Indeed, Howell (1998) suggests that such associations offer only for the existence of male dominance.

The above discussion demonstrates that the mainstream philosophy of religion has thus far been unable to take into explicit account a number of constructed gender differences and dynamics, particularly in respect of the advancement of religious practice and thought. However, Ruether (1983) has suggested that since the end of World War Two there has been an increased and sustained prevalence for theological and biblical scholars to produce an increased number of feminist-led theological ideas that are shaped by writings that help to reaffirm the role and function of woman in the Western spiritual process. What resulted in these new trends, Ruether (1983) argued, created space for the 'problem' of God as a social construction, and one that, when reviewed, could be assessed in terms also as a theological construction. Ruether (1983) further asserted that symbols and nouns that advanced the idea of a female deity, i.e. Goddess, was indicative of a connotation that encompassed the environment of being, and one that was able to cross over the hierarchical pressures that are caused by patriarchal expectations and limitations, but that these trends also allowed for redemptive experience for all religious followers, regardless of sex or gender (Daly, 1973).

Using this process, the development of a number of philosophical categories, such as those advanced by Suchocki (1982), have offered a new resonance to a number of metaphors that are used to advance the idea of 'God'. To Tuchocki (1982), the allure of feeling correlates with the underpinning narrative of religion as a tool for realising both justice and peace. Nonetheless, this approach also contributes to a blurring of lines that exist between a range of personal experiences, including the psychological, the somatic, and the religious. Consequentially, Ruether (1983) was able to develop an idea that was referred to as the 'feminine divine' which, it was argued, aided the concretisation of a morphology that allows for women to be a party, an equal party, for that matter, to the philosophy of religion in the West.

This paper has touched on elements that helped with the identification of a number of contradictory movements in regard to the relationship between women, the practice of religion, and the social dynamics of the West. These spheres, this paper has asserted, have been proven to reflect a number of underpinning variables that have shaped this discussion. Consequentially, we recognised earlier on that a research-led enquiry of this theme absorbs works from a number of alternate and divergent literary perspectives that help to shape the practice of religious feminism in the West. With this, it can also be concluded that these subjects are likely to veer towards additional associations with schools of thought that normally lie outside of the religious or theological line of enquiry. As such, in order to assess religious feminism in the west, this paper has crept into areas that not only concern religion, but also politics, sociology, and psychology.

Conclusion:

The reality of the philosophy of religion from a feminist perspective is often viewed in terms of being a recent development. However, this paper has already found that this is not an entirely accurate reflection of reality. After all, it has relied upon texts that date back to the late 1800s. There, as is the case now, religious feminist ideals advanced lines of thinking that challenged the male domination of religion. This practice has been built upon by more recent religious scholars who, consequentially, are intent upon questioning the core roles and functions of religious texts and, as the discussion has indicated, seek also to question the purpose of male-led language and traditions that see God as a male, whilst the potential for a female deity is dismissed. When one considers recent texts which help to shape the Western religious perspective, it is apt to suggest the need for fresh of academic reassessments of the role of gender enquiries as part of religious feminism. As such, this paper concludes that the patriarchy at the heart of Western religious practice has been subjected to sustained challenges since the end of World War Two. This has resulted in a series of emergent themes that challenge the relationship between men and women within Western religions, but also are creating a feminist religious ideology.

The utility of an emergent feminist ideology has, as the discussion demonstrates, allowed religious scholars to develop ideas regarding the function of religious practice in a manner that does not impact the standing of women as 'religious beings'. Arguably, the creation of feminine divine has assisted with the concretisation of structures that can act as vehicles that allow for the female cohorts within Western religions to become equal partners in the religious journey. As such, 'feminist religion' in the West can be considered in relative radical terms, and this reality shapes both the literature and thinking that exists in that area of thought.

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