

# ‘Feminist Theology’, ‘Lived Religion’ and the Investigation of Women in Conservative Religions as Changing the Agenda of the Study of Religion\*

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**Abstract** In this article, it is demonstrated how scholars located in various disciplines have brought their feminist agenda to the study of religion in what I see as three different routes: feminist theology as disputing the old discipline of theology in Western countries; ‘lived religion’ as offering an alternative vantage point to religious studies in the U.S.A. and the U.K.; and a focus on women in conservative religions worldwide innovatively studied by feminist anthropologists and sociologists. Often these differing routes between feminist theologians, female scholars in religious studies and feminist social scientists are perceived by their immediate followers in terms of ‘mutual disregard’ or ‘double blindness’ (King 2004; Woodhead 2007; Llewellyn & Trzebiatowska 2013). However, I believe a broader social and substantive analysis of the different positions of feminist theologians and feminist social scientists as I show here is more adequate. This illustrates very well that not only intellectual training in a certain discipline contributes to a research position, but also the social, political and religious relations, networks and power relations in which the researcher stands, or finds herself standing in.

**Keywords** religious studies; gender studies; social sciences; religion and gender; feminist theology.

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## 1. Introduction

In this article I want to give an insight into how the study of religion has changed in the recent past with the development of a critical gender perspective. First, I will present the two disciplines that have traditionally focused upon religion as their main subject, theology and religious studies, and I will show how they have been influenced by gender studies and what results this has had. I also want to show the impact of a critical gender perspective in the fields that have a less

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\* Invited contribution.

systematic stance towards religion, such as the social sciences in which the study of religious themes only forms a small niche, but which are increasingly important for the development of religion and gender research. I hope that such an overview is helpful for all upcoming research on this very interesting terrain.

I realise that my own gender critical perspective on theology, religious studies and their mutual relationship plays an important role in this essay, both on a personal level and because of my position as professor of Religion and Gender at Utrecht University in the Netherlands. The personal level I introduce at the beginning of my contribution. However, my position in the Dutch academic world of today is also of significance here. For example, the institutional forms of theology and religious studies, as well as that of gender studies, which exist for instance in Italy, are quite different from mine; in my case, these are constituted by predominantly Anglo-Saxon intellectual traditions. This forms a substantial difference with institutions that are more oriented towards German or French academic traditions (Palma 2017; Oliver & Warrier 2008). This is one of the points that I would like to discuss with this article: to which institutional forms of theology and religious studies, as well as gender studies, do you actually relate in your work, and what does that mean for your research as far as it touches upon gender *and* religion?

In the following sections I will address these questions: I will start with a personal acknowledgement, then I will discuss the position of theology and religious studies as academic disciplines in a historical and contemporary perspective. Next, I will show when and how gender studies became involved in the study of religion, tracing both the routes of feminist theology and of 'lived religion'. Third, I will present some examples of what I esteem interesting and promising forms of research in the field of religion and gender from the field of social studies, based on empirical research into what women actually do in different and mainly orthodox religious contexts, and what they themselves mean by 'acting religiously'. I will finish with a few conclusions.

## 2. Personal acknowledgement

I started my professional life as a feminist theologian coming from a Roman Catholic background, in a Roman Catholic Theological University in the Netherlands. In the first twenty years of teaching and undertaking research in this field, the relationship between feminism and Christianity never felt a great problem to me. On the contrary, I had become a feminist to change the Roman Catholic religion that I grew up in, and my philosophical and theological

studies, as well as my training in gender studies, gave me the tools to work toward this goal, as did the networks I participated in. I opted to work in systematic theology on feminist hermeneutics, I wrote a dissertation on the works of the radical feminist theologian Mary Daly, and I organised several collaborative research projects on feminist theological subjects in the Netherlands, for instance on corporeality, religion and gender (Korte 2000a; Korte & De Haardt 2002; De Troyer et al. 2003).

After twenty years, in 2006, the political, cultural and religious situation had changed more and faster than I had expected. The Dutch Roman Catholic Church had become much smaller, as well as far more conservative, and Dutch society had turned secular in a very evident way. The Roman Catholic doctrines on family values (such as gender complementarity and the prohibition of abortion and euthanasia) gained a prominent role in public debate; the more the secular society rejected these doctrines, the more the Roman Catholic Church pushed these warrants to the fore, and banned the dissenting discussion of these views from within its own ranks. I was not allowed to teach at this Roman Catholic University in the Netherlands anymore because of my liberal and feminist theological views. I changed to a professorship of Religion and Gender at a State University in the Netherlands, Utrecht University, in the faculties of Religious Studies and Gender Studies. At least for the Roman Catholic bishops, but also for the civil authorities of Utrecht University, the discrepancy between my feminist views and the theological stances of the Catholic University had become unbridgeable. However, the strange thing was that for myself this was not fully the case, I still felt a feminist theologian, which left me, for long time, in a position of confusion about my profession and belonging.

I provide this example from my own life to illustrate where my own position regarding gender studies and religious studies comes from and how this is situated. I am not only interested in describing what people, and especially women, *do* when they are participating in religious communities and what their ideas and opinions are, but I am also studying them to learn about their efforts to *change* these communities at the level of organisation, doctrine, ritual and other practices, and to understand the impact of their efforts on their selves, their communities and the wider society. I will return to this topic at the end of this article.

### 3. Theology and religious studies as academic disciplines

The disciplines in which religion is studied as a central subject are theology and religious studies, two disciplines with very different backgrounds in terms of their status and genesis. Theology is one of the oldest fields of science, dating back to the early days of European universities in the twelfth century. From the very beginning, it developed in close contact with the Roman Catholic Church because its primary goal was to provide professional training for the higher ecclesiastical cadre. Characteristic of Western Christian theology is that it is centred on the study of sacred texts. This practice knows a long tradition of authoritative interpretation combined with a normative and church-based instance that monitors this interpretation, which tends to favour conservative and archaic views of science. As it developed, it came to consist of a normative discourse in an argumentative style based on religious doctrines and liturgical practices and it has, spoken from a modern point of view, an ‘insider’s perspective’, which means that statements are professed toward its particular faith community, and that these statements are also justified with regard to this community.

Further, in European countries, most established institutions for theological education derive their position from the Peace of Augsburg (1555) which installed the principle of *cuius regio, eius religio* (“whose realm, his religion”). Theological institutions became connected to the form of Christianity of their own country, such as Lutheranism in Scandinavia, Anglicanism in England, various forms of Protestantism in the Western European countries, Roman Catholicism in the south of Europe and Eastern Orthodox Christianity in Eastern Europe. This results in the discipline of theology leaning heavily on local circumstances and authorities (Straumann 2008).

As a result of processes of secularisation and individualisation, theological institutions, especially in Northern and Western Europe, have decreased in number and size in recent years, and their influence has diminished considerably. On the other hand, it is precisely the fact that these institutions are linked to churches and religious communities that allow them to continue to exist, and the highly fluctuating relations with the civil authorities in various regions also contribute to this (Kennedy 2005; Kennedy & Zwemer 2010). In Northern and Western Europe, the ties with the Christian churches have become much looser, while in Eastern Europe and Russia an opposite process occurs, involving new alliances between the churches and politics; in both cases,

the Christian churches are focusing on identity politics to increase their visibility. This is also reflected in the theological education at institutions in the various regions.

Since the last two centuries, academic theology as a discipline in Western countries has also become known for its extensive and creative interpretations of religious texts, and its elaborated views on hermeneutics (or 'systematic reflection' on text interpretation) in intellectual circles (e.g. Friedrich Schleiermacher), which has resulted in twentieth century currents such as liberal theology (e.g. Paul Tillich), political theology (e.g. Johan Baptist Metz) and liberation theology (e.g. Gustavo Gutierrez). The movement known as 'feminist theology' has found most of its starting points within these currents from the early seventies on.

Religious studies (at least the European form of religious studies I am considering here) emerged in the nineteenth century as part of the theological education in Europe at the time of the colonial regimes. Religious studies were initially designed to support this colonial policy and the missionary activities that came with it. Religions differing from Christianity were studied with the question of how they related to Christianity, the superiority of which was undisputed at the time. However, Christianity's reputation also had to be increasingly defended as more and different religions came to stand side by side and over and against it. Religious studies scholar Tomoko Masuzawa has described this process in her book *The Invention of World Religions* (2005), in which she shows how Christian scholars struggled in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to justify the privileged position of their faith, while theorising and classifying other religions such as Buddhism and Islam against the backdrop of Orientalism, the experience of colonialism and postcolonial struggles (Masuzawa 2005). The definition of "world religions" that resulted from these processes contributed to a hierarchical ranking of religions, based on the superiority of Western culture and the role of Christianity therein, and the process of 'othering' of various cultures, and are still present in definition debates on religion to this day (Cotter & Robertson 2016).

In the second half of the twentieth century, religious studies in Europe, as a discipline, gradually freed itself both from its position within theological education institutions and from its colonial agenda (Taylor 1998). It has, however, positioned itself over and against the discipline of theology, claiming to be a neutral, objective and scientific field of studies and in this sense, it has become somewhat frozen in the opposition of the secular versus the religious. In this Western European form of religious studies, classical scholars of religion

from the beginning of the twentieth century such as Rudolf Otto, Max Weber and Emile Durkheim often figure to guide insights on religion, but also the great societal and cultural philosophers of the nineteenth century, such as Marx, Nietzsche and Freud, are influential on this point. It took until the late 1990s for feminist religious scholars to gain a foothold in this field, especially because of the prevailing idea that this discipline had to be defended as a neutral, objective and 'real scientific' field of studies which formed an additional hurdle to overcome from a critical gender perspective.

During the past twenty years, religion has become a more pronounced subject of study outside the above sketched dual field of the disciplines of theology and religious studies. From other disciplines, especially the social sciences with anthropology, sociology and psychology, religion is now studied within these disciplines' own approaches. In practice, it is mainly the individual status of the discipline, such as sociology with its emphasis on quantitative methods, or anthropology with its field research and interview methods, which determines how religion is approached, as the study of religion occupies only a small place in these vast disciplines. Interestingly, some fruitful approaches from gender studies that have an impact on the research agenda of religions currently come from individual scholars in these fields of research.

Hereunder, I will discuss the various ways in which gender approaches have changed the agenda of the study of religion. I present them here under the headings of 'feminist theology', 'lived religion' and 'research into women in conservative religions', respectively, and by doing this I aim to explore the mutual (in)comparability of these approaches.

#### **4. Gender studies involved in the study of religion: feminist theology**

Looking at the way gender studies have made an impact in the study of religion in all the above-mentioned disciplines, the remarkable fact is that feminist scholars have gained a foothold in theology much earlier than in religious studies or in the other disciplines that focus on religion. 'Feminist theology' can be described as a women's movement in Christian and also Jewish theological studies, emerging in the 1970s in the United States and Western Europe as part of the second feminist wave. Feminist theology was supported by a large group of women in the Christian churches who, at that time, began their process of social emancipation. They extended this programme to the religious

communities to which they belonged and to the corresponding theological institutions. At the heart of this movement were well-educated white Christian and Jewish women who criticised both church organisations and church teaching and practices from the Enlightenment principles of equality and self-determination. Feminist engaged theologians ended up in theological institutions as part of this movement and they brought about substantial renewal of the theological curriculum. They drew their strength both from the ideas and practices of the second feminist wave and from theological renewal movements such as political theology and liberation theology, which also strongly depended on the philosophy of Enlightenment. In the last quarter of the twentieth century, they made a major contribution to the theology of various Christian churches, as well as to Jewish thought (King & Beattie 2005; Ruether 2002; Chopp & Greeve Davaney 1997; King 1995; Raphael 2019).

I will briefly discuss the work of two feminist theologians that I would like to present because of their special connection between European and American intellectual traditions, but also to show where their major feminist obstacles actually lay, namely in obtaining an academic theological education and achieving and securing positions at university institutions.

Mary Daly, Roman Catholic by birth, lived from 1928 to 2010 and was from the New York area. She acquired seven Catholic university degrees, two of which were obtained in Switzerland in the 1960s at the only university in the world that did not exclude women from the highest courses in systematic and philosophical theology. Her stay in Europe gave her decisive new impulses. The Second Vatican Council (1963-1965) in Rome left an indelible impression on her awakening feminist consciousness: she remembered seeing numerous cardinals in pompous processions with a small group of silent nuns in their wake. In 1967 she was appointed associate professor of theology at Boston College in the United States, and at that time wrote her first book, *The Church and the Second Sex*, which was a modest plea for gender equality in theological and ecclesiastical fields (Daly 1968). It relied heavily, as its title indicates, on Simone de Beauvoir's *Le Deuxième Sexe* (1949), but in contrast to De Beauvoir, Daly optimistically foresaw a gradual change in the Roman Catholic Church. However, Daly had not foreseen the opposition that this – in her eyes – 'moderate' book evoked: Boston College decided not to renew her appointment. Nationwide protests led to this decision being reversed, and Mary Daly gained national fame as a Roman Catholic feminist. In the 1970s, she rapidly radicalised: she joined the women's movement and began to see a decisive link between women's liberation and divine revelation. In 1973, she

presented this in her famous book: *Beyond God the Father: Towards a Feminist Philosophy of Liberation* (Daly 1973). According to her, facing sexism leads not only to a radical critique of religiously sanctioned patriarchal power, but also to a new redemptive naming of oneself, God and the world from women's own perspectives. With her striking aphorism: "If God is male, then the male is God", she became the figurehead of emerging feminist theology. In 1975, she made a 'qualitative leap beyond patriarchal religion.' No longer did she criticise Christianity and other religions for their patriarchal character; she now declared patriarchy itself to be the prevailing religion of the whole earth, on which she published several more books. Central to her life's work was the transition of women as objects of theology and philosophy to religious subjects, and the emphasis on their agency and subjectivity in this context (Korte 2000b; 2000c; 2009).

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, the second feminist theologian I would like to briefly introduce, came originally from Romania and was born in 1938 in a German Roman Catholic family that fled to Germany during the Second World War. She received her theological education in West Germany; her ambition to study theology required special episcopal approval. She was the first woman to successfully complete the theological training for priesthood students in Würzburg. In 1970, she received her doctorate from the Catholic Theological Faculty in Münster with a study that showed both her feminist interest and her solid stance in historical-critical theory, a relatively new approach in biblical studies (Schüssler Fiorenza 1972). After her doctorate she moved to the United States, where she was appointed biblical scholar at the University of Notre Dame. There, in 1983, she published *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*, a landmark book on feminist biblical interpretation (Schüssler Fiorenza 1983). This book was written in the context of the emerging academic gender studies in the United States and Western Europe.

Schüssler Fiorenza revised the historical-critical hermeneutical principles of the biblical approach with which she was familiar from her training in light of these new feminist historical and literary methods. She presented women as historical actors whose presence and activities are not sufficiently recognised in the biblical texts. These texts need to be read with an understanding of the systematic obscuring of women's part in early Christian communities. At the same time, they must be read with an awareness of what women probably did do: they acted, for example, as apostles, leaders of house churches, missionaries and deaconesses. There is no 'objective' or 'factual' account of the events of



early Christianity; the methods Schüssler Fiorenza proposes are reconstruction and imagination in a feminist and liberation theological perspective. With *In Memory of Her*, Schüssler Fiorenza reconstructed early Christian history as an era in which gender oppositions and conflicts are considered very similar to those of today. She thus opened up a new perspective on both the genesis of Christianity and the contemporary theological relevance of the central Christian texts. For her, the Bible is not a 'timeless archetype', but a 'historical prototype', which is a source and model for the liberation struggle of women and other oppressed people. To her astonishment, she was not allowed to use this book in her own lectures at Notre Dame: it would not meet the standards of scientific objectivity. Schüssler Fiorenza then left for the Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and went on to become the first Krister Stendhal Professor at Harvard Divinity School in Boston. This accelerated her academic work and led to numerous new publications and activities in line with *In Memory of Her*.

Mary Daly and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza were part of a generation of eminent female theologians, to which also belonged systematic theologians Rosemary Radford Ruether and Carol Christ, historian Carolyn Walker Bynum, philosophers of religion Grace Janzen and Ursula King, Jewish theologians Judith Plaskow and Melissa Raphael, Afro-American theologian Delores Williams and many others. This group was very well known, and partly still is, both in the academic theological world and in Christian and Jewish church circles (Fulkerson & Briggs 2012; Raphael 2019; Giorgi & Palmisano 2020). Their legacy is huge and rich: they have written on biblical interpretation, systematic theology, practical theology, ritual studies and spirituality all from an engaged feminist perspective and they have recovered women's history through all stages of religious history, which also means the discovery of many of these women's texts.

What made this group of scholars so influential turned out to also be its major limitation. Their 'insider's perspective', namely the fact that they focused on the credibility of their religious views for a particular faith community, namely the Western Christian churches, and that they based this on the corresponding sacred texts, lost much of its relevance especially in the increasingly strong and rapidly secularising Western world from the 1990s on. As the churches became smaller, more conservative and confessional, feminist theologians lost the constituency that had always supported them; these were the liberal believers who had now left the churches in large numbers. The social and political influence of this progressive form of Christianity, particularly in

Western Europe, declined significantly. The faculties of theology became smaller and much more conservative in a secular culture surrounding them, and in Europe some theological institutions also shed their feminist theologians, as my personal example already showed.

## **5. Gender studies involved in religious studies: ‘lived religion’**

The most successful collective intervention in religious studies from a gender perspective comes from female sociologists of religion, actually a substantive number of scholars located in the United States and the UK who focus mainly upon Christianity. They were relatively late in developing their own research agenda from a gender studies perspective, probably due to the ‘hard’ scientific-theoretical requirements to be met in their discipline, and the lack of appreciation for research on religion related to the general expectation of secularisation trends in Western countries in the twentieth century (Woodhead 2007, 2008; Neitz 2014). They also had only few female role models in the study of religion: feminist scholars could only appeal to a handful of scattered individuals as predecessors, such as Islamologist Annemarie Schimmel, Hindu scholar Wendy Doniger, anthropologist Susan Starr Sered or classicist Elaine Pagels.

In this case, the combination of historical-contextual and ethnographic research into women’s lives in religious communities, actually in the Western world, and a critical rethinking of the principles of this research in light of gender studies proved profitable. I will give a brief outline of the most promising projects and authors on this front.

‘Lived religion’ was initiated from the beginning of the twenty-first century mainly by female sociologists of religion who focused on the religious practices of Christians as well as those of other or new religious groups in Western countries (Orsi 1997; McGuire 2008; Ammerman 2014, 2021). In contrast to the great emphasis in the Anglo-Saxon sociology of Christian religion on doctrinal theological statements, church-state relations and ecclesiastical organisations, their aim is to use empirical study to chart the daily lives and religious practices of people of faith. The predominance of the secularisation thesis is criticised: religions change rather than diminish and can no longer be described solely in institutional and confessional terms. The inherently Protestant character of the conceptual framework of the current sociology of religion is also addressed. In it, belief in a pure, inner form is presupposed and

rituals and other religious practices related to material and physical matters are perceived with reserve.

'Lived religion' starts from a very different conception of what matters to religion: what people feel, experience and find is at least as important as what they think or believe, and the aspects of religion that make 'religious worlds' real and present are placed centrally, such as religious rituals that take place in everyday life. Additionally, the hybridity in the religious experiences and practices of those interviewed is looked at: the simultaneous presence of different religious movements or loyalties. These connections have become frequent and unpredictable, which means that not the classical institutional divisions of religions should be taken as a starting point when studying religious experiences and practices, but new authorities, invented traditions, imagined communities and new forms of belonging. In particular, the description of women's religious experiences, in relation to the everyday reality where they mostly take place, has given an innovative impetus to the sociology of religion, while simultaneously affirming research principles from gender studies such as studying the agency of women, and the emotional and corporal embeddedness of their practices. Sociologists Grace Davie, Daniele Hervieux-Léger, Meredith McGuire, Nancy Ammerman, Kim Knott and Linda Woodhead all work from this direction.

## **6. New perspectives from social sciences on religion and gender: research into women in conservative religions**

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, it is also female scholars in anthropology, sociology and philosophy of religion who have been shaping a gender critical research agenda in religion and are adding new insights to it, especially from a focus on women in conservative religions. These scholars have a much more detached relationship to religion than the feminist theologians and the religious studies scholars I have just discussed. They have an 'outsider's perspective' towards any form of religion and their commitment is not so much with the religions they research, as with the groups of women they focus their research on. With this commitment, they take recent developments in gender studies as their starting point, relating to famous scholars in this field such as Joan Scott, Judith Butler and bell hooks. What makes these scholars particularly interesting in my view is that it is precisely because of their research material, namely women in various religions, that they give critical but also innovative impulses to the gender studies debate. Their subject is, at first glance, often

entirely contradictory to their own feminist principles and assumptions. Most institutional religions have conservative gender regimes and are dismissive of modernity, including women's and LGBT+ rights. The confrontation with this situation provides important new insights, both for the gender studies research agenda and for the study of religions (Fedele & Knibbe 2013; Gemzöe, Keinänen & Maddrell 2016; Starkey & Tomalin 2022). I will discuss here three interventions that are very productive in my view. They all rely on a rethinking of the concepts of agency, authority and authenticity from a gender critical perspective with respect to certain groups of women in religion that are studied.

Saba Mahmood, anthropologist and ethicist, is the most illustrious example of this trend. She was born in 1962 in Pakistan and came to the United States in 1981 to study at the University of Washington. Eventually, she moved to the University of California, Berkeley, where she became a tenured professor in the Department of Anthropology, until she passed away much too early in 2018. She has left an indelible mark on the Western feminist debate by challenging its liberatory and progressive assumptions exactly by discussing the results of her research into a group of conservative Islamic women in Egypt. Her major work, *Politics of Piety* (2005), was based on ethnographic observations of women participating in the Islamic revival movement in Cairo, a moral reform movement whose orthodox practices are commonly viewed as inconsequential to Egypt's political landscape (Mahmood 2001; 2005). In this book, she challenged the Western notions of agency based on autonomy and individual freedom invoked by feminist scholars when analysing this type of movement, and asked:

How do we conceive of individual freedom in a context where the distinction between the subject's own desires and socially prescribed performances cannot be easily presumed, and where submission to certain forms of (external) authority is a condition for achieving the subject's potentiality? (Mahmood 2005: 31)

The value of Mahmood's work lies in its success in broadening the argumentative potential of feminist theory while also revealing its limitations. The *Politics of Piety* constitutes a deeply layered critical reflection on the limits and problems of dominant assumptions regarding agency, freedom and subjectivity that are so important in major strands of liberal feminist thought, a reflection that is created by precise and uncomfortable research into women's lives while they are partaking in conservative religious movements. Moreover,

with her research, Mahmood also stimulated interest in the unpacking of the polarised secularism-religion dichotomy underpinning feminist discourse (Sullivan et al. 2015; Mahmood 2016).

The second feminist scholar I want to present here is Orit Avishai, sociologist of religion, who currently has a leading role in the revisioning of the gender studies debate in religion. Her original contribution lies in the coining of the term 'doing religion'. She was born in 1970 in Israel and is now professor of Sociology at Fordham University in New York. Her field of study is the position of women in conservative religions, in particular Orthodox Judaism, and she questions how to conceptualise women's position herein from the perspective of their agency. Her position forms a response to social studies of women's experiences of conservative religions which associate agency with strategic subjects who use religion for extra-religious purposes. In contrast, she considers agency in the first place as religious behaviour and religiosity as a constructed status. Drawing on studies that examine how Orthodox Jewish Israeli women observe, discuss, and understand the regulations on marital sexuality, she seeks to explain religious women's agency as *religious* behaviour, or the 'doing' of religion. She shows, as she states herself, that doing religion is associated with a search for authentic religious subjecthood and that religiosity is formed in accordance with the logic of one's religion, while at the same time it is in the context of controlling messages about symbolic boundaries and cultural others. This approach ensures that religion is not discussed as *sui generis* or isolated, or in a vacuum distanced from other aspects of life, but that its study allows actual, empirical and theoretical flexibility to consider a range of phenomena (Avishai 2008; 2016). In this way, she ensures that, on the one hand, religion is not written out of the picture and is studied as an integral part of the researched women's lives, while on the other, she approaches religion as embedded in other cultural practices, thus staying close to the lived religion approach.

The final example of an innovative contribution to the research agenda of religion and gender comes from Finland, from Elina Vuola. She was born 1960 in Finland and is Professor of Global Christianity and Dialogue of Religions at the Faculty of Theology at the University of Helsinki. She also participates in the lived religion approach and works as an ethnographer, but what makes her interesting is that she links this position to a feminist theological approach and that she works on a comparative basis. She has developed several interdisciplinary research projects that combine research on religion in Finland and in Latin America as it is lived (ethnographic methods) with theological

(textual) analysis in order to create a more comprehensive picture of how theology and religious identities interact, especially in contexts where these two might be in tension with each other. Her objective is to understand the complex relationship between certain Judeo-Christian religious traditions and their followers' identities and sense of agency within them (Vuola 2016a).

One example of her work concerns the worship of the Virgin Mary at the level of ordinary people, which she has investigated in research projects in both Finland and Latin America. Her thesis is that the meaning that, especially women, give to Mary implies both a confirmation of their everyday experiences that centre around motherhood, family life and sexuality, and also contains a more transcendent meaning with potentially religion-critical and religion-transforming elements. She analyses sexism in the Christian tradition, which of course is also present in the official teachings on Mary, and in relation to this looks at women's own capabilities to interpret and transform their religious traditions. From an analysis of the stories, poems and prayers that circulate in the popular piety of Mary, she observes that the creative 'work' that is present here is directly related to the concrete living conditions of these women and to their spiritual ambitions. The figure of Mary in particular lends itself pre-eminently to this: in the official doctrines of Roman Catholic and Orthodox traditions she is presented as an exemplary believer, but at the same time also as the Mother of God, and she functions as mediator between the earthly and heavenly worlds. Supported by the work of feminist philosophers of religion Grace Jantzen and Luce Irigaray, Vuola argues that Mary is seen by many women as a 'divine ideal', that is, as a comprehensive and alternative religious experience of the world around us grounded in women's own experiences. In this sense, Mary constitutes a transgressive symbol (Vuola 2012; 2016b). Vuola believes that it is precisely through interdisciplinary cooperation between ethnographers, folklorists and feminist theologians that this kind of research can be achieved, and is more sceptical about "feminist theorising that sees religion primarily as sociopolitical or institutional, drawing its conclusions from either an easy link between formal religion and women's subjugation or from doctrinal statements" (Vuola 2012: 518). I find the type of research presented by Elina Vuola particularly interesting because she puts text based religious materials at the centre of her research while at the same time using ethnographic methods to analyse this, and tries to give an interpretation of the life world of these women that incorporates these religious texts' materials.

## 7. Conclusions

In this article, I have demonstrated how scholars located in several disciplines have brought their feminist agenda to the study of religion in what I see as three different routes: feminist theology as disputing the old discipline of theology in Western countries; 'lived religion' as offering an alternative vantage point to religious studies in the U.S.A. and the U.K.; and a focus on women in conservative religions worldwide innovatively studied by feminist anthropologists and sociologists. Often these differing routes between feminist theologians, female scholars in religious studies and feminist social scientists are perceived by their immediate followers in terms of 'mutual disregard' or 'double blindness' (King 2004; Woodhead 2007; Llewellyn & Trzebiatowska 2013). However, I believe a broader social and substantive analysis of the different positions of feminist theologians and feminist social scientists as I have shown here is more adequate. This illustrates very well that not only intellectual training in a certain discipline contributes to a research position, but also the social, political and religious relations, networks and power relations in which the researcher stands, or finds herself standing in.

Secondly, I have shown where I think interesting initiatives lie when it comes to the study of religion from a critical gender perspective. Feminist theological approaches are certainly of importance here, particularly the study of religious texts and their hermeneutics, and how people relate to them. Post-secular feminist philosophy such as that of Saba Mahmood is, secondly, also of great importance as an angle of approach because it poses critical questions to current conceptions of religion in relation to historical and political changes in society.

Thirdly, the historical and empirical approach of 'lived religion' is important because this approach maps from a bottom-up position how people's lives are structured on a daily basis and what role religions might play in them, instead of analysing this from the other way around. The above sketched perspectives help to focus on specific gender issues that are important for understanding what drives people in the religious field, such as the question of women's own share in religious communities, the distribution and handling of power relations within these communities, and the question of what these religious traditions as such have to offer women and how this can be expressed.

Finally, I have argued that I consider it important that feminist theological and social science approaches to religion become more intertwined. I personally think this is a particularly fertile field of research.

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