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Feminist Orientation as an Integral Part of Religious Studies¹

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Introduction

Approaching religious studies from a feminist perspective is often criticized as going against the strict self imposed value neutrality of this discipline. More favorably it is tolerated as the special field of individual female scholars concerned with a previously neglected topic, i.e. the role of women in religion. Neither of these points of views does justice either to the self-appraisal or to the objectives and consequences of a feminist perspective in religious studies. This paper sets out to show that the inclusion of a feminist perspective not only means progress with regards to a more precise scientific procedure but also strengthens the claim religious studies make to be critical of ideology².

Following several introductory comments on the traditions and methods of religious studies that favor value neutrality I will briefly touch on the emergence of and basic ideas behind a feminist understanding of science and then demonstrate their application in religious studies. In the last section I deal with the functions and consequences of a feminist orientation as an integral part of religious studies.

1. Religious studies in the area of conflict between efforts towards value neutrality and the necessity of taking a position

Since their emergence, religious studies have not ceased to operate in an area of conflict that is characterized by two poles. On one hand is the effort to maintain an unbiased and value-free attitude during the research process. This is linked to the claim to be able to formulate statements that can be scrutinized empirically = the *meta* level of the scientific procedure. On the other hand one finds statements made by people of faith or the religions themselves (and

1 This article is a revised version of an earlier contribution which focuses on the examination of the situation in religious studies in German-speaking regions: Edith Franke: "Feministische Kritik an Wissenschaft und Religion." In: Gritt Maria Klinkhammer, Steffen Rink & Tobias Frick (eds.): *Kritik an Religionen. Religionswissenschaft und der kritische Umgang mit Religionen*. Marburg 1997, 107-119.

2 Cf. Kurt Rudolph: "Die Religionswissenschaft zwischen Ideologie- und Religionskritik." In: Klinkhammer, Rink & Frick 1997, 67-76.

their respective theologians), which are characterized by subjectivity and evade scientific scrutiny = the *object* level, which is the subject of research within religious studies.

It has always been important for religious studies that they distance themselves from Christian theology and distinguish themselves as an independent scientific field. They accomplish this by not operating on the level of religious systems or religious objects, but rather research, examine and describe these from a meta level. Based on this they develop their own theories regarding the origin, transformation and development of religion. Religious studies are not concerned with the search for religious truth or the evaluation of religious theory and practice, but rather with the description and scientific investigation of religious phenomena. Within this context it is evident that both female and male scholars would be expected to maintain a distant attitude towards religion and religious practice and adhere to a maxim of value neutrality³.

However, just as one's own religious experience is not a prerequisite for working in the field of religious studies (as claimed by e.g. Rudolph Otto) neither is the obligation to maintain an anti-religious attitude (cf. traditions critical of religion since Feuerbach, Durkheim, amongst others). As early as 1977⁴, Seiwert made it clear that it cannot be the task of religious studies to substantiate or disprove the truth contained in religious doctrine. Statements such as "God is almighty" or "God is love" are just as empirically non-verifiable as the statement "There are no gods".

If expressions of faith contradict the personal convictions of scholars, it is difficult to take the respective religion's claim to truth seriously or to maintain a tolerant attitude. This becomes evident when for instance the ideas of practicing Satanists or statements within the context of feminist spirituality (such as "The goddess gives and takes life") are to be dealt with in the same way as traditional expressions of religion, e.g. the Christian creed. Despite a possible personal affinity towards or rejection of certain religious orientations, it remains the task of religious studies to categorize such statements as statements made at an object level and for

3 Cf. e.g. Sigurd Körber: "Bedingtheit und Distanzbemühen. Zur anthropologischen Situation des Religionswissenschaftlers." In: Gunther Stephenson (ed.): *Der Religionswandel in unserer Zeit im Spiegel der Religionswissenschaft*. Darmstadt 1976, 293-308.

4 Hubert Seiwert: "Systematische Religionswissenschaft: Theoriebildung und Empiriebezug." In: *Zeitschrift für Missions- und Religionswissenschaft (ZMR)*, 61, 1977, 1-18.

the moment to refrain from making an evaluation⁵. Due to this abstinence religious studies nearly fell into a state of paralysis and withdrew from participation in social discourse. To counteract this, the association *REMID* "Religionswissenschaftlicher Medien- und Informationsdienst" (Media and information service of religious studies) has recently organized conferences on topics related to religious studies and socially explosive issues. Two of these were the "Kritik an Religionen" (Critique of religions) in 1995 and "Streitfall Neue Religionen" (The dispute over new religions) in 1998. Another example for the inclusion of religious studies in current, controversial social discussions is the participation of scholars as special experts in the German *Bundestag's* (lower house of parliament) "Enquete-Kommission" inquiring into so-called sects and psychocults.

It is my opinion that the adoption of central claims made by feminist studies into this area of conflict between value neutrality and the necessity of taking a position can have both a settling and aggravating affect on the field of religious studies.

Before I go into this in more detail, I would first of all like to summarize the emergence of and the basic ideas behind feminist studies.

2. The emergence of and the basic ideas behind feminist studies

The origin of feminist studies in Western Europe and North America are directly linked with the emergence and development of the new women's movement beginning in the 1960s. The so-called "old" women's movement (which began in the 19th century and reached its peak at the beginning of the 20th century) was primarily involved in the political struggle for the legal and social equality of women, e.g. for women's right to vote. The new women's movement focussed more on the analysis of the structural and often subtle discrimination against women⁶. One of the primary matters of concern of the new women's movement has become not only to criticize and to change concrete social conditions, but also to analyze their

5 It is however advisable to maintain a sense of awareness when unreflected concepts of object language are used as terms relating to religious studies. With reference to Antes (1986), Pahnke points to this problem in the context of distinguishing between religion and magic and shows that scholars tend to assume terms from certain religious traditions while rejecting those from other traditions. Cf. Donate Pahnke: "Feministische Aspekte einer religionswissenschaftlichen Anthropologie. In: Donate Pahnke (ed.): *Blickwechsel. Frauen in Religion und Wissenschaft*. Marburg 1993, 13-41, p. 26 and Peter Antes: "Systematische Religionswissenschaft – eine Neuorientierung". In: *Zeitschrift für Missions- und Religionswissenschaft (ZMR)*, 70, 1986, 214-221.

6 Cf. Herrad Schenk: *Die feministische Herausforderung. 150 Jahre Frauenbewegung in Deutschland*. Munich 1992.

theoretical superstructure in the form of theories, ideologies and religions. This has led to the development of feminist critique and research in nearly all scientific disciplines, encompassing their theories and methods as well as their history and internal organization.

Since the areas and contents of feminist critique are comprehensive and diverse it simplifies things to refer to feminism in general terms and to *the* feminist critique of science. But the mutual agreement is that the neglect of socially and scientifically relevant experience was and is linked with the extensive exclusion of women in the history of the sciences. This development has led to gaps, biases and distortions in the empiricism and theory of the various disciplines. Thus central areas and problems of culture and society are not at all or only insufficiently reflected on. In the human sciences and the humanities, feminist research systematically pursues the question of how gender relations are bound to social and cultural processes of symbol formation and social change.

Woman scholars from various disciplines have concerned themselves with the meaning and the effect of gender relations within the context of their respective fields and developed directions of feminist research specific to their own fields. The influence of gender-specific relations of power, inequality and control of political processes is for instance being investigated in the area of political science. Social psychology is concerning itself with concepts of masculinity and femininity and their significance and function in different social contexts. One of the issues in the field of history is to make women and their different areas of influence historically visible and to include gender relations in historical reflection. For religious studies it is important to investigate the effect of religious symbol formation and assignment of gender roles on the status of women in religious communities and in their everyday social environment⁷.

Despite the diversity in their orientation, four aspects can be cited which demonstrate central principles of a feminist understanding of science:

1. The category of experience as an empirical point of reference for research.
2. Partiality and reflectivity – The necessity for a definition of the position.

⁷ The insight and results of feminist research are available in comprehensive and relevant specialist literature. In this section I refer to remarks made on "Frauen- und Geschlechterforschung" (Women's and gender studies), which are expounded on within the context of the University of Hanover's plan to promote women (1996) on the faculties of History, Philosophy and Social Sciences.

3. Contextuality and particularity.

4. Critical examination of the split between subject and object in the research process.

These strongly methodology-oriented approaches can similarly be found in other areas of science, e.g. in the critical social sciences, in particular in the maxims of qualitative social research⁸. A specifically feminist orientation is formed by the combination and the principle inclusion of gender difference in all phases of the research process.

3. On the development and application of feminist research in religious studies

While in fields such as theology or the social sciences feminist research and critique already have a long tradition and more influence this is not the case in religious studies. However, the last ten years there has been an increasing number of relevant research projects and publications in religious studies, above all in Anglo-Saxon regions. In this regard I would like to make reference to the work of Ursula King and Paula Cooley⁹. The panels on gender and religion on the occasion of the IAHR congresses in Rome in 1990, Mexico City in 1995 and Durban in 2000 also show that the thematization of questions regarding gender research are gaining in continuity and importance within the field of religious studies. The book *Blickwechsel – Frauen in Religion und Wissenschaft* (Change of view – Women in religion and science/ Marburg 1993) edited by Donat Pahnke provides insight into the work and the status of feminist religious studies in German-speaking regions. It contains systematical contributions as well as contributions from the perspective of religious history.

The issue of women in Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, etc. is no longer merely being added to, but rather that work has emerged that formulates systematizing questions with regard to the

⁸ This is certainly also a reason why feminists prefer to work with the methods of empirical qualitative social research. (Cf. Regina Becker-Schmidt & Helga Bilden: "Impulse für die qualitative Sozialforschung aus der Frauenforschung." In: Uwe Flick et al. (eds.): *Handbuch qualitativer Sozialforschung*. Munich 1991, 23-30.) It would be an enrichment to religious studies as well if researchers increased their use of the methods of qualitative social research for the examination of lived religion and religious change. In this way, the religious practices, theologies and organizational forms of women that have long been neglected by religious studies could be placed at the center of empirical religious research.

⁹ For example: Ursula King (ed.): *Women in World's Religions Past and Present*. New York 1987; King (ed.): *Religion and Gender*. Oxford, Cambridge 1995; Paula M. Cooley: *Religious Imagination and the Body. A Feminist Analysis*. New York 1999; Paula M. Cooley, William R. Eakin & Jay B. McDaniel (eds.): *After Patriarchy: Feminist Transformations of the World Religions*. New York 1997.

analysis of the symbolic conception of gender roles in the religions. Thus not only are the religious life and the religious experiences of women being thematised, but rather constructions of the divine and their influence on religious roles for women are being structurally analyzed. In her contribution "Wo sind die Töchter der Kali?" (Where are the daughters of Kali?), Adelheid Herrmann-Pfandt deals with the interaction of transcendental concepts and assignments of religious status of women. Birgit Heller analyzes Hindu-Brahman concepts of ideal femininity and their effect on the social and religious status of women in modern Hindu movements¹⁰.

In her contribution to the book *Turning Points in Religious Studies*, Ursula King defined three central areas for the various research tasks in the field of feminist religious studies:¹¹

- The investigation of the role and religious status of women in religious institutions and traditions.
- The investigation of the representation of women in religious language and religious thought, which should include an inquiry as to the relationship between the symbolic representation of women and its effect on women's social roles and their everyday life.
- The description of women's religious experience (also in contrast to that of men) and the description of women's religious life patterns.

She assigns different dimensions of feminist religious research to these task areas:

The *descriptive dimension* refers to the status, role, image and experience of women. The deconstruction of the androcentric framework is considered the *negative-critical dimension*, followed by the *positive-critical dimension*, i.e. the reconstruction of experience and elements of tradition.

There is also the *methodological dimension*, which is important in all three areas. This means always discussing and reflecting on the researcher's attitude as well as inquiring as to the use

10 Adelheid Herrmann-Pfandt: "Wo sind die Töchter der Kali? Auswirkungen von Göttinbildern auf den religiösen Status von Frauen in Christentum, Hinduismus und Buddhismus." In: Manfred Hutter (ed.): *Die Rolle des Weiblichen in der indischen und buddhistischen Kulturgeschichte* Graz 1998, 86-119; Birgit Heller: *Heilige Mutter und Gottesbraut. Frauenemanzipation im modernen Hinduismus* Vienna 1999.

11 Ursula King: "Religion and Gender". In: King (ed.): *Turning Points in Religious Studies. Essays in Honour of Geoffrey Parrinder*. Edinburgh 1990, 275-286.

of adequate methods in order to be able to understand that which has received little attention, has not been heard, or which has been interpreted in a biased way¹².

In the following I would like to demonstrate how the basic thoughts of feminist research cited in Section 2 above might be applied in religious studies.

1. The category of experience as an empirical point of reference for research: On the necessity for the empirical investigation of religion as lived by women

The individual life experience of women has been an important starting point for feminist research, and was particularly so in its beginnings. Starting with the slogan "Private is political", the new women's movement demanded that science, too, take individual experience seriously and draw on it in its reflection on and critique of theoretical statements or generalizations. At the same time the claim was made for the practical relevance of academic work and research.

These demands led primarily to a focus in the area of oral history and biographical research. The investigation of specific problems associated with women's biographies using methods of qualitative social research have recently become the starting point and empirical basis for a more extensive critique of traditional theoretical concepts. They were also used for drafts of feminist models of feminine socialization and moral development¹³.

What this means for religious studies is consciously beginning with the religious practices of women (and men as well) and empirically investigating the contents of lived religion. Researching the processes of religious transformation and identity formation amongst women using qualitative methods (such as participant observation and narrative or semi-open interviews) constitutes the empirical basis for investigating the validity of general statements regarding religion¹⁴.

12 Ursula King: "Introduction: Gender and the Study of Religion". In: King (ed.): *Religion and Gender*. Oxford, Cambridge 1995, 1-38; here 27f.

13 Cf. in particular the discussion concerning the "development of female morals": e.g. Carol Gilligan: *Die andere Stimme. Lebenskonflikte und Moral der Frau*. Munich 1985; Carol Gilligan & Lyn M. Brown: *Die verlorene Stimme. Wendepunkte in der Entwicklung von Mädchen und Frauen* Frankfurt/New York 1994; Karin Flaake & Vera King (eds.): *Weibliche Adoleszenz. Zur Sozialisation junger Frauen*. Frankfurt/New York 1992.

14 Cf. e.g. the work by Gritt Maria Klinkhammer: *Moderne Formen islamischer Lebensführung. Eine qualitativ-empirische Untersuchung zur Religiosität sunnitisch geprägter Türkinnen in Deutschland* Marburg 2000, as well as Edith Franke: *Die Göttin neben dem Kreuz. Zur Entwicklung und Bedeutung weiblicher Gottesvorstellungen für kirchlich-christlich und feministisch geprägte Frauen* Hanover 1999 (electronic publication by the University of

2. Partiality and reflectivity – The necessity for the definition of a position: The expertise of religious studies as a resource for differentiated perception and analysis of areas of social conflict

Contrary to the basic principles presumed by traditional science of neutrality and distance with respect to the research object, in its beginnings feminist research laid down partiality as a methodological postulate. This went so far as to demand that research be consciously designed and implemented for specific goals of the women's movement¹⁵.

However, in feminist studies the commitment to partiality for women was controversial from the very start. It quickly became clear that the differences amongst women were immense and that referring to "women" in a generalized manner was not acceptable¹⁶. In the current feminist discussion, partiality does not mean simply siding and identifying with other women, but rather the common interest to dismantle the hierarchy in gender relations and to improve women's living conditions¹⁷.

Instead of supposed objectivity, it is more a matter of recognizing one's own requirements and interests. Because scientific insight always takes place within a social and historical context which includes the person with the insight, the research process must include self-reflection. The claim for a precise scientific procedure can more readily be realized through the admission and laying open of one's own premises.

Thus at the beginning of the research process the researchers, both women and men, should reflect on and document their preconceptions and their interest guided by insight. The task of self-reflection also includes providing oneself with information to what extent working on an issue changes one's own way of viewing things, i.e. making possible blind spots visible. It may then become necessary to modify previously held assumptions about an issue.

Hanover).

15 In its analysis of traditional science's claim to objectivity and universality, feminist research developed methodological principles that represented the claim not only to make the variety of women's experience visible, but also to consciously take up partiality for women. Cf. Maria Mies: *Methodische Postulate zur Frauenforschung*. In: *beiträge zur feministischen theorie und praxis*, No. 11, 7th year, 1984.

16 Cf. e.g. Seyla Benhabib et al. (eds.): *Der Streit um die Differenz. Feminismus und Postmoderne in der Gegenwart*. Frankfurt 1993.

17 Cf. Becker-Schmidt & Bilden, 1991, 27; cf. also: Ursula Beer (ed.): *Klasse Geschlecht. Feministische Gesellschaftsanalyse und Wissenschaftskritik* Bielefeld 1989.

This kind of reflection in research within the field of religious studies is helpful and clarifying because it lays open underlying individual preconceptions and adds these to the scientific discourse. Feminist research in the field of religious studies could, for example, aim to uncover lost or insufficiently researched goddess cults in the Ancient Orient as a contribution to completing an incomplete historiography of religion. It could also investigate the gender-specific formation of symbols that contribute to the stabilization of social inequality as part of a study on the current founding of new religions. Above and beyond this, by treating issues that have been put under taboo and/or neglected, such as clitoridectomy on girls and its basis in religion, religious studies can help in providing those affected by or critical of such practices with information and argumentations. In addition, religious studies could make their expert knowledge available to stimulate public discussion and ensure a more widespread awareness of such problems¹⁸.

3. Contextuality and particularity – Considering religious phenomena and experience from a perspective that differentiates gender

A further, essential matter of concern for feminist studies is to define the respective context for which statements shall be valid.

The definition of the context can refer to different aspects: A blueprint for life and ways of life, religious or cultural backgrounds, economic living conditions, etc. Because what can be made visible by researching religious phenomena and what remains invisible is dependent on the concrete definition of the context. Statements about religious phenomena must always be considered within their particular scope of validity.

It goes without saying that women and men have distinct images of an almighty God the Father¹⁹ and that they experience a male-dominated hierarchical religious structure, such as in Islam or Christianity, differently. In many religions men and women are subject to different ritual regulations and religious obligations. Accordingly, it must be designated whether idealized phases in the religious life of a Hindu are valid for men and women or whether they depict the model of a specifically male life pattern.

18 Cf. Ursula Spuler-Stegemann: "Mädchenbeschneidung." In: Klinkhammer, Rink & Frick 1997, 207-219 and Franke 1999.

19 Cf. Caroline Walker Bynum et al. (eds.): *Gender and Religion. On the Complexity of Symbols*. Boston 1986.

Religious studies have become very sensitive to issues of Eurocentrism and Christocentrism; it would be desirable to develop a similar sensitivity with regard to androcentrism and thus help to avoid making generalizing or abridged statements about *the* faithful or *the* church members.

4. *Critical examination of the split between subject and object in the research process:
Taking women as subjects of religious action seriously*

Following the claim by critical empirical social research not to treat the people being investigated like objects, feminist studies have repeatedly demanded that the split between subject and object in the research process be abolished²⁰. This is based on the view that researchers as well as those being researched are both the subject as well as the object of social reality. This fact should be reflected on by virtue of the mutual influence and interaction between researcher and research object. Ideally, both would participate in the research process as "learners"²¹.

The abolition of the subject-object separation understood in such a way cannot mean the abolition of the distinction of object and meta level. This distinction must continue to be a matter of course in religious studies.

The aim is to strive for a higher degree of self-reflection in the research process in order to avoid perceptual distortions and substandard descriptions. At the same time, one's own personal involvement or reserve with respect to the research object should be taken into as much consideration as the influence and change of the research object and the researcher brought on by the research process.

In this sense, the investigation of lived religion can be understood as a process of interaction in which subjective relationships can emerge and in which the researcher and the object can change. If they are reflected on accordingly, the feelings and impressions that typically develop during qualitative investigation procedures can serve as an additional source of information and provide further opportunities for clarification²².

20 Cf. Regina Becker-Schmidt: "Probleme einer feministischen Theorie und Empirie". In: *Feministische Studien*, No. 2, 1985, 95.

21 Cf. Mies 1984, 15.

22 Cf. also Philipp Mayring: *Einführung in die qualitative Sozialforschung. Eine Anleitung zu qualitativem Denken*. Weinheim 1993, 20. This also applies – if in a more mild form – for research in the field of religious history; any

Subjectivity is no longer considered to be a disruptive factor in the research process, but rather through reflection it becomes a productive and clarifying element²³.

Over and above this, taking the faithful seriously as acting subjects means involving men – and particularly women – in research as competent partners and experts on an internal perspective. Investigations of religious phenomena will then not make the representatives of official religious traditions – such as the Holy Scriptures or certified experts – the only objects of research, but rather the forms and contents of lived religion as well.

4. Tasks and consequences of a feminist orientation in religious studies

One aspect of a feminist orientation in religious studies is directed inwards; it refers to the *scientific practice* of the field. As demonstrated above, the inclusion of a feminist perspective in religious studies means criticizing the androcentric orientation of traditional religious studies, pointing out research desiderata and perceptual distortions, and filling these gaps amongst other things by investigating the religious ideas and religious practices of women. In addition, it is a matter of analyzing gender relations in religious practices and in the formation of religious symbols as well as in the formation of theories in the field of religious studies.

The integration and application of a feminist critique of science in religious studies does not merely result in the addition of a new chapter on the subject of women. Nor does it result in equating feminist religious studies with research by women on women. Rather it means developing an awareness for possible androcentrism in both historical as well as systematical approaches and understanding the questions and perspectives of gender research as a natural and integral part of all research carried out in the field of religious studies.

As a consequence of a clear standpoint against the discrimination of women, the feminist perspective in religious studies also includes socio-political objective and a critical attitude towards religions and ideologies. In doing so, feminist religious studies can take a place in

text, any archeological document can trigger off reactions such as fascination or repulsion.

23 Cf. Maya Nadig: "Zur ethnopschoanalytischen Erarbeitung des kulturellen Raumes der Frau". In: *Psyche*, 40, 1986, 193-219 and Nadig: "Der feministische Umgang mit der Realität und die feministische Forschung. Zehn Thesen". In: Karola Brede et al. (eds.): *Befreiung zum Widerstand. Aufsätze über Feminismus, Psychoanalyse und Politik*. Frankfurt 1987, 162-171.

the tradition of the critique of ideology as a function of religious studies (Rudolph 1978²⁴) and demonstrate patriarchal structures as an ideology in society and in religion.

Religious studies that comment on these issues in such a way can bring their knowledge into public discussions on religious and social conflicts and contribute to the objectification and clarification of problem areas. However, the effort towards a proper – free of androcentric distortion – investigation and representation of religious phenomena must remain distinctly separate from this. As an academic discipline, religious studies cannot make any standards for the evaluation of religions; criteria for a critique can only be developed based on political standpoints and objectives that orient themselves towards upholding human rights.

Religious studies can however exactly analyze whether and to what extent religious systems and symbol formation stabilize and justify social inequality, thus establishing a basis for pointing out the social effects and functions of religious systems over and above their work in a stricter sense.

In the process, the methodological principles of reference to experience, contextuality and reflectivity postulated by feminist studies could lead to clarification and contribute towards understanding that an androcentric view is biased and full of value judgement. This will consolidate the recognition of religious studies as an empirical discipline in the scientific community. The feminist demand for a firm definition of the interest of research leads to the clear definition of positions, which can enhance the open discussion of current social conflicts.

In this sense, the critical treatment of issues by religious studies does not mean evaluating the respective theology or religious statement with regard to content, but rather scrutinizing the consequences certain religious standpoints have for society. A precise designation could indicate that a position has been taken – for the benefit of each of the women concerned.

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